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GOING HARD, GOING EASY, GOING HOME: DEATH AND DYING IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family and friends, often one and the same, both living and dead, whose successes and struggles have made the completion of this work possible. To my Grandmother Agnes ‘Nanny’ Stoneberg, her eldest daughter Deeanne and my Beloved daughter, Yael-Ines – each of whom have educated me in the art, philosophy and practice of Humanism. To my biological and political Brothers & Sisters: particularly John-Bernard, William-Wallace, Lewis-Holden, Kristen, Jodie, Alexis, and April, thank you for your strength and courage. My deep and unreserved thanks are owed to all of my teachers, colleagues and students – too numerous to name. Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to those from and headed toward ‘The Hill,’ located off the North Fork of the Siuslaw River, Oregon.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation answers the question: How can art represent the essential human experience of death, particularly when the creative context is one of extreme violence? And, what can be learned about the risks and rewards of the living's relationship with the dead by way of these artistic representations? Further, how do these aesthetic renderings of death construct the ethics of life for survivors? In the case of African America, discussion of, and responses to, these questions have been primarily explored in novelist and creative writing. This dissertation examines these novelistic treatments of death-tropes, or thanatropes in eight novels written by African American writers in the 20th century. These authors explore through the use of thanatropes the potential for reconciliation after atrocity. A central concern of the literature analyzed here is: What kind of ritual, art, or aesthetic is restorative of wellness and health after catastrophic violence? African American morbidity in the psychosocial context of captivity, enslavement, forced labor, incarceration, segregation, and apartheid, has influenced African American aesthetic, especially death ritual. Hence, the artistic representation of death, ritual and funerary rites in 20th Century African American literary works offer commentary on a universal human condition, mortality, experienced under conditions of continuing adversity and inequality.

PREFACE

In 2006 when I first arrived in the U.S. South I visited a tourist destination recommended for newcomers. The site was a former rice plantation, and during the tour I learned that the location was still owned by the benefactors and heirs of the enslavers who had profited from the system of chattel slavery. This was remarkable to me for a number of reasons. Having arrived in South Carolina from Zürich, CH, where the social reconciliation post-*Shoah* involved reparations and intensive efforts to divest of profits gained through forced and enslaved labor, the celebrated continuity of profits by the family claiming title and patrimony to this former rice plantation through proceeds from tourism was a stunning commodification of atrocity. The space was a former industrial agricultural death-camp, and I was extremely uncomfortable with the complete absence of recognition for the victims and survivors. Extreme discomfort became utter confusion upon witnessing a wedding party's recitation of vows in the same location where admittedly, only a dozen decades prior, thousands of people had been systematically worked to death. I asked the docent about the location of memorials to the victims of enslavement and was 'politely' ignored. My interest in African America's thanatologic resistance was ignited by a desecratory placard introducing the one small burial ground acknowledging the victims, which read: "Here lie the Faithful Servants." This dissertation observes African America's responsive efforts at recovery and consecration through literature.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Take Flight, Take Flight”

“Which one is a fool? One who has been dead for these many years or a master in a dead man’s house. I’ll bet they’ll be trying to figure that one out for a long time. A long, long time” (178).

-Robin, *Flight to Canada* (1976)

“Put yo’ key in the lock, Mistah Man. Give the sign and come in, please you, suh. I heard a nigger say Death is his mammy. His old black mammy is name Death, he say. Well and good, onliest thing about it is Death is a man” (220).

-Gabriel, *Black Thunder* (1927)

Death is a threshold of wonder that has an ancient and venerable history as an object of human inquiry and artistic representation. Dying is also an aperture through which all humans ever born will eventually pass; it is the inevitable conclusion and culmination of each individual’s existence. Our relationship to death, and its personification wondered about in the opening these opening epigraphs display an acknowledgement that death, domesticity and identity coalesce in the creation of our ideas about individual ethics and racial politics. These excerpts by two African American authors each writing from one side of a great divide in the conditions of black mortality in the U.S. brought about by the Civil Rights movement also evidence a continuity of

debate and contemplation on how death figures into the construction of ‘race’ in the ideal of a national ‘family.’ The novel is the vehicle for, and window onto the relationship between death and ‘race’ in the U.S. Of course, the aesthetics of deathart and mortuary ritual offer insight onto human societies wherever one chooses to examine these dynamics. These dynamics as explored in 20th century African American novels speak directly to the power of aesthetics and rituals to remake even the most profound loss into a resource for political change through forging imagined political alliance between the living and the dead. The arch of novelistic deathart in 20th century African American writing moves from the documentarian style of the slave narrative, to the efforts at reverential discover and recovery of the black ‘body’ for consecrated re-interment – at least textually – to the irreverent and satirical work of disowning the dead as political agents. Perhaps Toni Morrison, who the reader will find haunting this dissertation throughout, yet never directly addressed, is the prime example of a death-artist whose corpus of ritual text straddles the reverential approach of Walker and the irreverent stream of new writers such as Colson Whitehead or Randal Kennan. Morrison’s text perform that ritual task of ‘dancing the body home,’ combining humor, horror, compassion, consecration, irreverence, laying to rest, and ecstatic recognition that our dead are not our ‘best things,’ to borrow Paul D’s words from Morrison’s 1987 award-winning novel *Beloved*, although Morrison clearly argues that without our dead, we cannot be our best selves. Optimistically, her work from my perspective foregrounds the way that the dead are always available to the imagination of the living, however and in whatever roles we choose to caste them. The most prominent tropes in novelistic death art by African American writers identified in this dissertation are offered as rubrics

through which other literary theorists can categorize and analyze the thanatologic stylistics of Morrison, as well as the dozens of other authors whose creative work should be read as death ritual.

In the 'Introduction' to *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*, edited by Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor, the two argue that life is the primary theme in black women's literature across genres. Certainly, readers familiar with African diasporic literature in North America over the last three centuries will recognize that life, and the relationship between life, freedom and justice, are prominent themes in written work by both black women and men. Out of the context of diaspora and enslavement has come an incredible intertextual meditation on the meaning of human life, on creating it, sustaining it, keeping it, and enjoying it. Yet, as this dissertation demonstrates, death is the analogue referent in all conversations in which life is the operative theme. This dissertation critically engages eight novels written by African American novelists writing between the Harlem Renaissance and the post-Black Arts Movement writings characterized by literary experimentation and signification on diverse stylistic forms of narrative.

Just as written works by black men and women in this period have argued over the relationship between life, freedom and justice, so too has the relationship between death, freedom and justice been a central theme in the rhetorics of authors grappling with literature and race in 20th century African American creative writing. Whether the concern is with meeting it, managing it, surviving it, or mobilizing it in the pursuit of freedom, death and dying re-occur as major tropes (thanatropes) in the history of 20th century African American fiction. Yet, death has been largely overlooked as an explicit

topic of critical inquiry until very recently, although death and dying clearly are major critical concerns in almost every novel published by African American writers in since the New Negro Renaissance. An explanation for the absence of direct critical examination of death and dying despite the dominance of thanatropes in the corpus of African American literature is that the theme is so ubiquitous that its metaphors, metonymy, ironic turns, struggles with naturalism, realism and modernism, as well as referential pointers to the foundational form of African American vernacular expression appear universal, and thus, unremarkable. The presence of thanatropes is so common in African American literature across genres in the 20th century that critical commentary has analyzed specific themes within this deathart, rather than examining novelistic deathart as such. There is a growing interdisciplinary interest in deathart, Thanatology, and African American literature in particular, however, and this momentum is warranted in that criticism benefits from categorization. A strong categorization that cleaves Black creative writing in the 20th century is whether or not the thanatropes are enlisted reverentially in ‘defense of the dead,’ or with hyperbole and irreverence toward ‘the dead’ as just one more category of constituents that reify ‘race’ as the measure of literary aesthetics. Novels read in this dissertation are reverential, and the thanatropes examined in these novels are the largest and most frequently employed. In naming, explicating and describing the operations of thanatropes in reverential creative writing by Black authors, future critical inquiry into African American novelist deathart will receives the benefit of a foil or standard architecture against which to evaluate and weight the emergence of irreverent thanatropes in African American fiction.

In a description of recently deceased African American author June Jordan's final work, *Soldier: A Poet's Childhood*, literary critic Joanne M. Braxton argues that in being “challenged by the knowledge of her impending death, Jordan becomes one of the first black women autobiographers to contemplate the impermanence of life” (Braxton, 146). The characterization of novelty assigned Jordan’s contemplations is an example of the critical ‘blindness’ toward death and dying as central themes in African American literature. The long history of Africans and African Americans writing in North America testify to the centrality of death as a object of concern, contemplation and representational struggle. For example, when read closely Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* (1861) ripple with death anxiety. The narratorial voice of *Incidents* constructs the experience of confinement as a kind of living death. Jacobs offers her readers an extended consideration of the transitory nature of human existence through her recollections of life in the coffin-like cubby in which she spent nearly a decade while hiding from her tormentor. A preoccupation with death resonates through African American letters entire, not only the genre of the slave narrative and testimonial, which of course gravitate around the issue of death inasmuch as the very act of writing is punishable as a capital crime. From Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s poetics in *The Dying Bondsman* deathbed scene, to James Baldwin’s depiction of deathbed dynamics in his 1952 novel, *Go Tell It on The Mountain*, the death and dying process works as a plot device, a platform for political speech, and the occasion for literal and metaphorical flight. Although this dissertation is limited to readings of 20th century African American literature, the thanatropes identified and described are germane to the study of 18th and 19th century North American writing by black authors.

Deathart and the Rhetorical Context of Audience Reception

This dissertation is delimited in examination of novelistic deathart by African American writers working in the 20th century because the rhetorical context of production from the Harlem Renaissance through the contemporary moment shares in specific features that shape audience reception. First, there has been a growing African American readership for these novels, and thus the circulation of thanatropes has crossed over from black community and popular culture to literary expression and back again; a recursive loop of interpretive deathart whose synergy manifests in examples such as Yolande Cornelia "Nikki" Giovanni's eulogy to Tupac Shakur, an orator and lyricist known for his explicit death-poetics like 'How Long Will They Mourn Me?' and 'Bury Me a G.' The inter-textual signification between novelistic deathart and other forms of African American thanatology make the 20th century a rich vein for critical mining. Secondly, the project to identify the dead, to 'exhume' in language the unmarked discursive graves of the dead, to document and sacralize the experiences of death and dying through literary ritual by African American authors in the 20th century is highly connected to the concurrent politics of mourning and the critical discussion of the rights of the dead to be represented with dignity arriving out of the European Holocaust, or *Shoah*. This legalistic discussion of representation and the rights of the decedents and their descendents, specifically 'the dead' qualified as victims of crimes against humanity has opened up a conversation that is available to African American literary critics searching for terminology and theoretical frameworks of analysis, though clearly these projects have distinct conditions and trajectories. Lastly, literary deathart in the 20th century by Black writers has fragmented to include thanatropes as irreverent rhetorical

device and satirical opportunity as opposed to classical forms of deathart such as elegy, obituary, and eulogy. The earnest and emergent quality of 19th and 20th century African American deathart gives way at the turn of the millennium to ironic hyperbole. Take for example the closing line of author Percival Everett's 2009 novel, *I am Not Sidney Poitier*, wherein the protagonist has his mother's burial headstone engraved with the phrase 'I am Not Myself Today.' The contemporary moment in African American criticism and literature is one that calls for a pause and reflection on the major features of novelistic deathart and the general outlines of the most prominent thanatropes in order that critics have a handle on the implications of irreverence toward death and dying in black creative writing. The intersection of postmodern aesthetics, African American literary criticism and irreverent thanatropes is a promising field that is difficult to map without first laying a cartography of African American thanatology more generally.

Reverence and Irreverence as Aesthetic Choice

Each novel selected for examination in this dissertation is a like a linguistic tombstone with the inscriptions of cause of death, survivors, and quality of passing carved for public display and memorialization. In the epigraph opening this introduction drawn from satirist Ishmael Reed's 1976 neo-slave narrative *Flight to Canada*, the question is a provocation to all those with an allegiance to the dead. The first chapter of this dissertation examines 'diagnosis' -- a thanatrophe that is present in reverential as well as irreverent African American novelistic deathart. The butler Robin's observation that the terminal disease of *Dysaesthesia Aethiopica*, (a 19th century diagnosis given slaves who ran away) is one that is not easily resolved with a quick answer is Reed's acknowledgment that the project of reverential deathart is necessarily time-consuming.

Irreverence toward the dead rejects the critical project in African American letters that seeks to ‘defend the dead,’ yet at the same time ‘the dead’ remain a powerful implied audience as well as the object of attempted representation for Reed and others satirists. African American creative writers working in the irreverent and satirical tradition of Reed include Colson Whitehead, Percival Everett and Randall Kenan -- authors whose work is divergent stylistically but similar in disavowing the possibility or political benefit of defending the dead. Kenan’s collection *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* won the 1992 National Book Critics Circle Award and mocks the notion that re-interment of symbolically desecrated bodies through sacralized literary entombment is obligatory from an aesthetic, ethical or political perspective. Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011) follows the protagonist Mark Spitz’ team of body ‘sweepers’ clearing the zombie stragglers of a post-pandemic Manhattan. Whitehead’s irreverence toward the dead, and their naming and disposal is part of a theoretical reconciliation toward the irrecoverability, and misguided futility of consecrating the dead. Indeed, in *Zone*, those interested in defending the memory of the dead suffer from the diagnosis of Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder. So far, the reader of this introduction has been offered a cursory taxonomy and description of a one critical stream of African American thanatology that is not discussed in any of the four chapters; irreverence. The purpose of in doing this is to clarify that death and dying is not a minor field, or a period theme, or a passing literary device, but rather *the* core topic and concern across fields in African American literature. Critical conversations about contemporary African American fiction and the politics of postmodernism are deprived of a significant theoretical resource from which to understand language,

representations, and aesthetics without a recognition that the object under study is most appropriately categorized as mortuary ritual.

By far, the majority of African American 20th century fiction, and its critical reception, subscribes to the philosophical project of ‘body recovery’ and the commitment to re-interment of the dead in a language that is reverential and sacralized. In the second chapter on the thanatope of ‘disease,’ questions of intergenerational gendered power dynamics, the problem of deficits in language and descriptions of community health, and the location of African American women as subjects challenges the theoretical stream of irreverence. The consequences of community and individual disease for black women represented by African American women authors hardly allows for the satirical play of titles like *My Pafology* offered by writers like Percival Everett. Offered as a rebuke to the publishing industry by the dehumanized and stereotyped protagonist of his 2001 novel *Erasure*, this title is too evocative of the bitter life and death struggle to sustain the individual and collective ‘racial’ body in the novels by Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor presented in chapter two. The social pathology of racism, with its attendant medical apartheid, inequitable distribution of health resources, disparities in access to care, and disadvantageous biomedical models of health, conspire in in the thanatope of disease presented in the second chapter to present a deadly serious and grave description of black women’s subjectivity within the context of collective efforts to cope with the epidemic of chronic pain and suffering experienced by African America in the post WWII period.

The complexity of critical response and the diversity of literary approaches in African American fiction to the question of how to deal with the dead is demonstrated in chapter three’s reading of two novels that foreground the thanatope of ‘the deathbed.’

The sharing of textual evidence at the deathbed of loved ones that documents the history of individual and collective experiences with systematic racial violence is a common motivation for literary criticism. The study of death and dying, and the import of the deathbed in African American literary criticism is demonstrated in an interview with well-known literary critic Henry Louis “Skip” Gates, Jr., wherein he attributes his most recent intellectual energies to recover the names of the dead and their stories to an event that occurred when he was nine years old and in attendance at his grandfather’s funeral. Gates recounts that his father shared with he and his brother a scrapbook of family obituaries, beginning a “lifelong fascination with genealogy...one of the ledgers was a picture of a black woman wearing midwifery clothes, and an obituary dated January 6, 1888 that read: “died this day in Cumberland, Maryland, Jane Gates, an estimable colored woman.” His father then revealed that Jane Gates was a slave, who had eventually bought her freedom, and that an unknown white man had fathered her children. Then, as Gates tells it, he turned to his sons and said, ‘I never want you to forget it.’ Gates said: “That night, I sat in front of our family TV and I interviewed my mother and father about their family tree. I had no inclination the day before—I had never even thought about a family tree. But somehow, seeing her picture and reading that obituary changed my life.” The deathbed investiture to ‘never forget’ resonates in all of the novels read in this dissertation. Chapter two’s novels by Ernest Gaines and John Wideman explore the space of the deathbed as a sacred topos full of rhetorical potential, with an emphasis on the un-natural deathbed experienced by African American men in relationship to the prison industrial complex and 20th century camp-system of internment, execution and incarceration correlated with black male morbidity and decreased longevity in the U.S. So too in the

thanatope of the deathbed used in Chapter two's novels, the precedent is aware of and burdened by the public display of black death, and the implications of deathbed indignity for the entire community's political status. A dignified deathbed -- the deathbed being that space occupied at the end of the disease course through the moment of interment or burial -- is indicative of political status, while indignity during this transition, whether by public humiliation during execution, or posthumous desecration, is indicative of dehumanized and debased political status. The deathbed is a thanatope that bridges the transition between life and death in that African American death ritual regards the moribund patient, the soon to be martyred precedent, and the recently 'passed' bodily remains to be states along a continuum that ideally culminates in 'home-going' through the portal of burial. The recently deceased lying in wake can be regarded as still on their deathbed until their remains are interred in consecrated ground. Stories about the decedent, orature, elegy, eulogy, epideictic and other honorary forms of rhetoric elevate the political status of the 'racial' collective, and last wishes expressed on the deathbed carry considerable cultural gravity as represented by reverential African American writers, including Gaines and Wideman.

The last thanatope examined in chapter four, 'burial,' conveys the finality and success of the black subject in transcending, going home, escaping, or transitioning. The dissertation closes with the trope of burial as the last stage in the symbolic journey of the subject in African American thanatology, as well as the discursive goal at the level of the text for the novels analyzed. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple* both seek to exhume and then 'bury' the collective body of African American history passed-on without suitable or adequate sacralization. Extra-textually and intra-textually, both of

these novels work to locate the unmarked grave of African American historical experience and cultural life, and then to exhume the corpus of experience for the purpose of creating consecrated attachments between the living and the dead. Hurston and Walker both are keenly attuned to the power of orature and vernacular in mortuary ritual, and use stylized linguistic choices to prepare the discursive ‘ground’ of the text as memorial site. *Their Eyes* and *Purple* both challenge the legacy of patriarchal memorialization and commemorative monumentation exclusive of black women’s participation, labor, and creativity typical of public burial. In sum, we read eight novels that fall clearly within the stream of literary and critical scholarship interested in the project of naming the dead, documenting desecration, dis-interment or exhumation of the desecrated corpse, and the symbolic re-commitment of the dead through literary ritual to a discursive grave that bears the hallmarks of consecration and appropriate recognition of the decedents’ humanity and posthumous continuity within the community of survivors.

Each chapter pairs two novels that take each other as inter-texts, and examines how these novels treat a specific thanatope in the course of death and dying. A query that runs through all four chapters, is: How can art represent the essential human experience of death, particularly when the creative context is one of extreme violence? And, what can be learned about the risks and rewards of the living’s relationship with the dead by way of these artistic representations? Further, how do these aesthetic renderings of death construct the ethics of political life for survivors? In the case of Africans in North America, discussion of and response to these question have been explored in 20th century African American Literature with the outcome that novelistic deathart is a routine response to the dehumanization experienced in a ‘race’ based socioeconomic climate .

Treatment of death in this body of literature also answers a question about the potential for reconciliation after atrocity, that is: What kind of ritual, art, or aesthetic is restorative of wellness and health after catastrophic violence? High African American morbidity in the psychosocial context of captivity, enslavement, forced labor, incarceration, segregation, and apartheid, has influenced African American aesthetic, especially death ritual. Hence, the artistic representation of death, ritual and funerary rites in 20th Century African American Literature work as a 'test case' in this dissertation for the questions posed above.

Chapter One, 'Diagnosis' reads Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* alongside *Oxherding Tale* by Charles Johnson. Chapter Two, 'Disease Course,' couples Alice Walker's *Meridian* with Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*. Chapter Three, 'Deathbed,' joins John Wideman's *Hiding Place* with Ernest Gaines *A Lesson Before Dying*. And finally, Chapter Four, Burial & Bereavement examines in tandem Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Collectively, these novels demonstrate that death and dying are universal experiences that individuals and communities manage through humanistic and spiritual rituals. These rituals frequently include the presence of specific types of funerary poetics such as elegy and eulogy. The absence or unknown location of ancestral bodies is compensated for by these authors efforts to perform 'graveside ritual' with the text acting as the symbolic burial ground. Because reverential funerary ritual is the dominant critical response to 20th century thanatropes presented in these eight novels, the rhetoric of death and dying is typically epideictic, that form of speech that appeals to the shared values present and shared between speaker and audience, author and reader, the living and the dead. Shared values

operate rhetorical appeals to solidify the logical premises or basis for an argument by gathering in the advance agreement of the audience to the cause or case offered by the speaker. In the case of African American literature in the 20th century, the cause has been to manage and evolve a form of death ritual, specifically creative, fictive and lyrical remembrance for victims, survivors and descendants of slavery in North America.

Diagnosis

The rhetorical context for literature and death in North American has been the circumstances of Enslavement, (acute violence & physical trauma, suicide), followed by racial apartheid (infant mortality, occupational mortality, chronic pain and dis-ease), and Post Civil-Rights Movement conditions of intergenerational health disparity. Each chapter demonstrates a dialectical pattern that exists in African American literature, which is the tension between death and dignity, and life and liberty. The dialectic between life and liberty receives significant critical attention—likely because of the resonance of this coupling in dominant U.S. political and artistic rhetoric. Yet, death and dignity and the experience of morbidity, such as it has been for African Americans, is revealed as the locus for the innovation of aesthetics and rhetoric that affirms the humanity of African Americans in the face of dehumanizing political conditions. Literary critic Karla Holloway has noted that, “Instead of death and dying being unusual, untoward events, or despite being inevitable end-of-lifespan events, the cycles of our daily lives were so persistently interrupted by specters of death that we worked this experience into the culture’s iconography and included it as an aspect of black cultural sensibility” (6). Understanding the rhetorical context for the novels examined in each chapter is essential. If we look at contemporary conditions of health disparity as the

outcome of the longer history of systematic dehumanization and desecration, the reasons for the preponderance of thanatropes in African American 20th century fiction becomes apparent: “the infant mortality rate for Blacks in the United States is 17.7 deaths per 1,000 births, compared with 8.2 deaths for white babies. African American babies born to college-educated mothers have an 80 percent higher risk of dying in their first year than white babies born to college-educated mother...Homicide is the leading cause of death for African American males between the ages of 16-24. The life expectancy rate for Black men is 64.6 years compared with 73.8 for Black women, 72.9 for white men, and 79.6 for white women. It is troubling that the UN, in its quality of life index, ranked African Americans number 31...while white Americans were number 1” (149). The novels examined in this dissertation reveal an inter-textual traffic between rhetorical context and artistic production; because the conditions of death and dying for African Americans has been so markedly shaped by racial violence and systematic disrespect and desecration of the dead, creative fiction seeks to represent this circumstance and respond aesthetically in a manner that recovers the dead as legitimate members of the beloved community.

Moving away from the membrane between political discourse, health disparities and literary representations of death and dying in the novels examined in this dissertation, we can see that these novels also engage with prominent philosophical questions about the intratextual effect of language, symbolism, and literary conventions. Death and dying are figured as a form of rebirth into the transcendent ‘life’ of the ancestral collective. Literary theorist Qiana J. Whitted in her work *A God of Justice? The Problem of Evil in Twentieth-Century Black Literature* has noted that, “African American literature features a vigorous engagement with ‘second birth’ ceremonies of all sorts, with portals,

thresholds, and the momentous act of turning as a manifestation of black subjectivity” (73). At each stage of the death journey, from diagnosis to burial, the authors featured in this dissertation treat the membrane between life and death as a portal that has the potential to eventuate in the ‘re-birth’ of the *precedent* (the one dying). The dead are reborn through commemorative ritual and memorial sacralization -- they cross into the collective resource called on by the living in social justice struggles as well as intimate moments of personal need for continuity of attachment and affirmation of identity.

A brief survey of African American literary thanatology reveals a coalescence of scholarship exploring the duplex of death and dignity as they relate to black subjectivity. Three prominent examples are *Raising the Dead; Readings of Death and (Black)Subjectivity* by Sharon Patricia Holland (2000), *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories, A Memorial* by Karla FC Holloway (2002), and *Death and the Arch of Mourning in African American Literature* by Anissa Janine Wardi (2003). A focus in the secondary literature that is mirrored in this dissertation is the exploration of Black identity formation as a function of death and death’s representational practices. This dissertation joins the stream of reverential literary thanatologic work that, while the dominant mode of criticism in African American criticism, is antithetical to hegemonic representations of death in U.S. culture. At the same time that death as an inescapable fact in human life is ignored and/or invisible in hegemonic culture, except as the repressed and abjected object of fear undergirding celebrity and youth obsession, death ironically is a perennial sign in popular media, from RIP tattoos to the genre of teen-zombie romance. Death has become camp (Watkin, 2004). The fact of human mortality is represented in the contemporary U.S. political theater without accuracy; hundreds and

thousands of deaths do not register as worthy of public attention, while fantasies of death as the portal to supernatural beauty and eternal romance capture a large reading audience in North America.

Dis-ease

Even those whose deaths do warrant notice are frequently refused acknowledgement as dead and instead memorialized or reincarnated into a posthumous identity that is also a commodity form; witness the proliferation of deathart around the figures of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls. These figures survive in the memory and language of the living. Political theorists have long noted that veneration of the dead by those in power is aimed at solidifying a position of cultural dominance. Equally, those in power deny and dishonor the dead of the disempowered, which functions to limit the circulation of counter-hegemonic memory. This phrase, ‘the dead of the disempowered,’ means not to imply a strict and actual heredity between anyone living and a historical community, or between a contemporary community and a historical personage. Instead, what is indicated is the group of imagined ancestors of persons inhabiting marginalized social positions. So, for example, dead royalty traditionally receive sustained and extravagant burials and memorialization. Conversely, indentured, devalued, or indigent laborers traditionally receive a potter’s grave. State orchestrated display of death rites for heroes of European imperialism and domestic colonialism shores up white hegemony in the U.S. Treatment of the dying and dead, and their representation in literary and political discourse, has a correspondence with the allocation of and access to power, resources and healthcare. Even as the conditions of Black morbidity are largely ignored in dominant culture, alongside attention to mortality in general, African American families and

communities have managed the fact of mortality and the social conditions of Black death by bearing witness, carrying out funerary rituals, burial rites, memorial exercises and care of the corpse. These dynamics are explicated in each chapter's attention to one 'moment' along the death continuum.

Deathbed

Deathbed ritual manufactures the social conditions for collective recognition of the descendant's humanity. Scholar Karla Holloway makes the point that "Black culture's stories of death and dying were inextricably linked to the ways in which the nation experienced, perceived, and represented African America" (6). Consequently, "instead of death and dying being unusual, untoward events, or despite being inevitable end-of-lifespan events, the cycles of our daily lives were so persistently interrupted by specters of death that we worked this experience into the culture's iconography and included it as an aspect of black cultural sensibility" (6). The linkages between thanatologic constructions of citizenship and 'race' have drawn commentary by historians, political scientists and literary theorists alike. Holloway, Holland and Wardi gather up the threads of this commentary and weave a critical fabric with stories that, in the words of Holloway, "haunt our cultural imaginary" (1). This dissertation explores the haunting of 20th century African American fiction and the various deathart and ritual forms that authors have attempted in order to optimize the benefits that the presence of the dead can create for the living community.

I argue that the novels examined herein are part of the throughline of resistance to racial oppression and dehumanization that can be seen in the history of North American literary production by people of African descent. Novelistic deathart by black creative

writers in the 20th century has consistently offered an argument on what constitutes death with dignity. The authors featured in this dissertation take part in the longer tradition of thanatologic representations as political resistance to dehumanization. From the 18th century elegiac poetry of Lucy Terry ('Bar Fights,' 1746) and Phillis Wheatley to the 21st century autobiographical reflections of Earnest Gaines and Alice Walker, the ethics and aesthetics of dying for the one passing as well as the bereaved take precedence in literary corpus of African America. This dissertation argues African American rhetors have inherited and created death rituals ripe with the potential for empowered political identity and sacralized community formation at the literary 'graveside' of history.

The historical evolution of African American morbidity and the political economy of health in North America since the turn of the century explicated in each chapter's reading of a thanatope build to the conclusion that literary critics ought turn our attention more fully novelistic deathart. The thanatopes selected for reading in the following four chapters are presented as critical templates for further study. It is not too strong a statement to say that diagnosis, disease course, the deathbed, and burial are significant tropes in the majority of African American fiction presented in the 20th century. Each of these thanatopes has the potential for excavation, to use a thanatic metaphor. In addition to these thanatopes that track the course of pre-mortem experience, the post-mortem thanatopes of bereavement, memorialization, commemorative graveside ritual, as well as political and personal death rituals such as honorific naming of the newly born after the dead, or homage and tribute offered at the site of burial, remain rich areas for literary investigation.

The fact that writing was a capital crime for Africans in the Americas, as well as a revolutionary act of defiance against racist dehumanization cannot be divorced from literary critiques of thanatropes presented in novelistic deathart. Representations of death and dying, and rituals observing the passing of human life through that universal portal were prohibited under white supremacist political regimes in the U.S. not by coincidence. Desecration of the dead and denial of death-rites is an ancient form of aggression and oppression documented cross-culturally and transhistorically in human affairs. Novelistic deathart, the use of thanatropes and death rituals represented in this dissertation generally signify on three non-sequential overlapping rhetorical moments in African American history: 1) the period of morbidity due to direct and acute physical trauma of enslavement, 2) the period of Jim Crow style mortal injuries caused by terrorization, internment, and apartheid, and 3) the period of systemic, diffuse, psychosocial and environmental violence. In all of these periods, precedents have faced death with the knowledge that their ‘rebirth’ or transcendence would be troubled by the prospect of desecration, indignity and disrespect. Primary and secondary literature reflect the necessity of rhetorical and ritual invention by authors defending the dead in order to resist continued life-threatening racism byway of discursive ‘recovery’ of the body, exhumation, and then ritual re-interment in the novelistic ‘ground’ sacralized by culturally appropriate and meaningful mortuary practices.

Deathbed ritual and its representations have continuously displayed the desire to reincorporate the dead into the living family, or beloved community for the sake of political strength, community health and individual wellness. In the following chapters we will see how novelistic deathart has been used as proxy burial ground for funerary

rights aimed at memorialization of the dead. Homage to ancestors through private and public commemoration emboldens social justice activism and is a rhetorically powerful venue for humanistic public discourse. Invocation of the dead, and speaking on behalf of the dead, or in the name of the dead is a literary device that occurs in each thanatope evaluated in the following chapters. Evidenced in this invocation of the dead is the fact that Intertextual traffic between literature and life on the matter of death is thick. Perhaps the most viscous, deep and organically complex pool of intertextual flow occurs in the testimonial, and representations of testimonial such as that which occurs in *Invisible Man*, *Oxherding Tale*, *Mama Day*, *Meridian*, *A Lesson Before Dying*, *Hiding Place*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *The Color Purple*. As is generally accepted in African American criticism, the model of testimonial literature seen in the genre of slave narrative is the primordial form in black creative writing in North America exactly because the expressive subjectivity of the writer risking death to offer evidence of black humanity has not only a literary 'life,' but an existence as legal and political death as well. Fictive testimonial in novelistic death, like the literature read in the following four chapters, is a genre and rhetorical form ancestral to the slave narrative. Incorporated in antebellum autobiographies of ex-bondsman, fictive accounts and parables, legal accounts and eulogies, the testimonial as literary form is foundational to African American funerary ritual and "death" rhetoric.

The literary renderings of "death," or thanatos, in 20th century black fiction bear the evidence of the relationship between 'race' and the political economy of life expectancy, morbidity and health in the U.S. that confirms a systematic denial of the rights of the living to conduct empowering aesthetic ritual or culturally appropriate

funerary obligations. This dissertation analyzes the major thanatropes of African American literature as part of the ongoing evolution of resistance to racial oppression and cultural genocide against freedpeople and their descendants. In these stories, death is seized as a moment of political opportunity, of spiritual and political *kairos*, a time of unique opportunity charged with significance when both public and private funerary acts have the power to engender new ‘race’ relations as well as to promote post-‘racial’ (because posthumous) ancestral identities. When decedents are promoted to the status of ancestors through death ritual, then descendants inherit the psychological benefit and political power associated with patrimony and pedigree. Therefore, funerary rites and their attendant aesthetic practices have a strong correlation with political rights, and their social antecedents. Funerary rights have been integral to African American sociality since slavery. Used for the purposes of building political affiliation, funerary rights integrated ancestors and descendants into an imagined community better equipped to create life-sustaining conditions. Through beautifully improvised and resignified ritual, “death” and its representational practices have been transfigured into an argument for freedom.

African American political assertions about the death, dying, dignity and political status have been codified in the rituals of cultural reclamation enacted within novelistic death art. Examples include the social justice jeremiad at the funeral pulpit, the graveside signing of hymns lauding freedom, and the democratic uprising provoked by the martyrdom of activists. Thus, study of Black rhetoric about death and dying in all its generic forms, from the novel to contemporary testimonial, leads toward an alternative literary periodization, demarcated by health status and mortality rates. Representational practices of death rhetoric cannot be extricated from the conditions and context of

African American life, which further confirms the critical import of their study by critics interested in understanding the continuity of spiritual resources, and the remaking of those spiritual resources on the crucible of thanatropes. Failure to examine the thematic continuity of thanatos in the corpus of imaginative texts created by people of African descent in North America since the Emancipation Proclamation leaves our analysis of African American literature and life impoverished and bereft of context. By extension, the explication of “death” tropes in Black literary production in the context strums the sinewy thread of life affirming aesthetic and ethical choices inherited and refashioned by survivors and descendants.

Burial

Cultural critic and thanatologist Charlton D. McIlwain has noted “among all the forms of experience that occur in any given culture, society, or community, death is the one experience that transcends them all” (1). Perhaps this is because what remains after death, if the body is recoverable, universally demand recognition as having been human. McIlwain’s claim about the universal presence of death across cultural contexts is followed up by his powerful study of the specific context of black funerary ritual in the U.S. Evidence seems to suggest that aspects of African spiritualities, various views regarding the dead, and specific burial practices can be seen in African-American communities from the period of slavery through the present (31). Novels such as Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) have been read as primarily about a pathological relation between the living and the dead; a relation in which the past is represented by a spectral figure that haunts the imagination of the living. Yet, both novels are also about healthful relationships between the living and the dead that can be

understood through reference to thanatological discourse practices in the African Atlantic that were inherited from West African cosmology. For example, in *Beloved* Denver's continued posthumous attachment to the character of Baby Suggs provides Denver with protection, comfort and guidance in her ambition to have a future different from her mother.

Likewise, the protagonist in *Corregidora*, Ursa, is buoyed by the persistence of her deceased foremothers in her psychic life until the trauma of a miscarriage puts her inability to have children at odds with the desire her dead mother, grandmother and great grandmothers' expressed desire for another generation. Throughout the novel, Ursa engages in an oral repetition of the history of abuse suffered by her foremothers at the hands of an ancestral enslaver named Corregidora. The repetition is at once deadening to her sense of well being while at the same time her rehearsal of the history enables her mother, grandmother and great grandmothers' voices to have a life after death. While Ursa is indeed haunted by the vicarious memory of abuse passed on to her through the stories of her foremothers, and the specter *Beloved* does certainly haunt the lives of those living at 124, in both postslavery narratives we can also see that the dead are allocated a legitimate presence that is best understood through its connection to West African eschatology and cosmology rather than exclusively through recourse to a psychoanalytic framework of haunting and trauma. Literary critic Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock has argued that, "haunting indicates that beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events," however, in African American fiction, haunting is only one among numerous thanatic tropes that signals a submerged history (5). The rhetoric of death and dying in

20th century fiction is partially about haunting, however, another more important but overlooked aspect of the rhetoric is the way in which it indicates a transcultural adaptation of West African thanatological discourse in the Americas.

This is not to argue that there was ever any homogenous entity identifiable as ‘West African thanatology,’ but rather as Bernard Bell has argued, the range of West African cosmological and eschatological belief systems from which enslaved people were ripped all included a general “belief in the need to celebrate and maintain close harmony and balance between such realms as ...the living and the dead” (62). Within the syncretic adaption of West African cosmologies and European folk and Christian traditions for living in the Americas, enslaved people found that their beliefs about the power of the dead were similar enough to their enslavers’ beliefs that the dead became a resource in negotiations over power. Europeans and European Americans also entertained beliefs about the ability of the dead to act in the present and intervene on behalf of the living, though this stripe of belief was frequently denigrated as ‘superstition’ and accorded little respect in polite public discourse. Nonetheless, enough thanatological overlap existed and amalgamation occurred between peoples in the Americas that the ‘ghost story’ and other types of death discourse did mitigate racial power relations. For example, shared African diasporic and white American beliefs that the living inhabit a world shared with the dead and thick with spectral traffic served as the basis for veiled threats of posthumous retribution taken by the souls of murdered slaves upon guilty enslavers.

Yet, the domain of thanatological rhetoric concerned with haunting, apparitions and specters in African American fiction is only a slim sampling of black North American death discourse. The broader context is one in which the positive celebration of

the dead and participation of ancestors in community formation occurs in a dialectic with the negative potential of the dead to wreck havoc and injuriously haunt the living. Death and dying in the North American 20th century postslavery narrative is a resource from which social justice claims can be staged with supernatural gravity and decorum. For example, when the protagonist in Charles Chessnuts' *The Marrow of Tradition* issues a scathing rebuke to a white supremacist over the body of his dead son, his speech is protected by the occasion. Similarly, when in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*, an abused housewife confined to her basement communes with her 'ancestors' over the body of her dead son, she imagines herself as licensed to speak out against her abuser. The body of her dead son hanging in her arms sanctions her rebellion and imbues her with authority, despite the ultimate failure of her efforts.

In 20th century black literature, authors take up the specified tropes of death and dying as the occasion for speech that directly confronts racial injustice. Social justice claims are premised on the space opened up by the bodies of the dead. The relationships between the living and the dead in this genre are continuous with West African cosmological representations of death that have continued to develop and evolve in what Immanuel Wallerstein calls "the extended Caribbean." As with West African cosmology, the cultural history in the Americas integrates the dead into the experience of the living so that there is nothing necessarily pathological about haunting, though supernatural presences certainly can be the cause as well as outcome of traumatic encounters. The presence of ancestors in the lives of their descendants is part of realist discourse in both West African and African Diasporic thought. Thus, the term gothic must be modified to work within the context of the extended Caribbean to indicate literature in which

haunting is unhealthy and signifies a divergence from normal and wholesome posthumous attachments between the living and the dead. Thanatology has been a subject of growing interest to literary critics in recent years. One need only look at a short list of influential scholars who have taken up the topic to see that literary criticism as a field cannot do without a theory of literature and death. A small sample of this nascent body of scholarly attention includes Paul Ricoeur's *Living up to Death*, Harold Bloom's edited volume *Death and Dying*, Jacques Derrida's *Aporias: Dying—Awaiting (One Another at) the Limits of Truth*, and Giorgio Agamben's *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*. However, the current state of analysis does not offer an adequate theorization of death and dying in African American literature, and in fact, African American literature offers up a new set of theoretical problems, most distinctly the very powerful influence of death on the political project of racial justice in the U.S.

Among non-African American literary critics concerned with thanatology, French theorist Maurice Blanchot's seminal contribution to our theory of writing as a form of death ritual and its representational practices is useful for several reasons. First, Blanchot's thesis that the experience of fiction and death are inaccessible to the individual's powers of description has strongly influenced modern literary reception of thanatic tropes in English literature. Yet, African American stories, or 'rhetorics of death' since enslavement contradict the notion that death is a category of human experience that is unrepresentable. Though it is true that no one is able to both die, and write about it sequentially, Black rhetors in North America have successfully imagined the subjectivity of the dead, rendering ancestors as participants within a living community of memory. But Blanchot's engagement with the theory of death in literature also helps us to think

about the circulatory system of meaning presented above in the phrase, ‘the rhetoric of death.’ Death rhetoric is language about the event, but it is also the language wrought by the event itself, or the language by which the disaster became capable of occurring.

Exploration of African American death rhetoric supports Blanchot’s central point in *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980), while at the same time suggesting an alternative possibility for conceptualizing death in literature. Blanchot argues that ‘The Disaster’ is in fact not death, but the infinite and complete detachment of meaning after death, which is never represented precisely because human dying is always in the process of happening. Thus, the individual perceives no starting or stopping point in the stream of deaths that make up the ongoing disaster. Alternatively, African American literature imagines redemption of ancestors through representation of ‘the disaster,’ beginning one name and body at a time. For example, in Sherley Anne Williams novel *Dessa Rose* (1986), the titular protagonist recites the names of dead children to her white host:

“Remembering the names now the way mammy used to tell them, lest they forget, she would say; lest her poor, lost children die to living memory as they had in her world...Even buried under years of silence, Dessa could not forget. She had started on the names of the dead before she realized that the white woman had gone” (136).

In this scene, Dessa’s recitation of the names gives a voice and subjectivity to the dead, (or “the Others,” to use Blanchot’s terminology), in her struggle to gain power in the present. The recitation of the names of the dead children, though incomplete and impossible to list in full, nonetheless begins the process of representation, and hence the coping with the disaster. This dynamic is examined more intensively in each chapter of

the dissertation, and conclusively the authors under review here offer a vision of managing the disaster rather than recovery. In fact, death is only figured as a disaster when the names, or bodies, or burial is denied dignity.

This introduction to the next four chapters has covered much theoretical ground, and attempted to bring the reader into familiarity with the major terminology, concepts, and literary concerns carried out in the course of the analysis of the thanatropes of diagnosis, disease-course, deathbed and burial. It will serve the reader to recall during the next four chapters that 20th century fictive representations of death and dying mirror the larger body of thanatic representation that occurs in the body of slave testimonials. Toward the goal of framing the following four chapters within the rhetorical context of African American deathart and ritual described in non-fiction testimonial, I offer this excerpt written by the ex-bondsman from South Carolina Charles Bell. Bell recalls that he had participated in funerary rights on the plantation where he was raised. Bell shared with his reader that:

I assisted her [enslaved woman] and her husband to inter the infant. . . and its father buried with it, a small bow and several arrows; a little bag of parched meal; a miniature canoe, about a foot long, and a little paddle, (with which he said it would cross the ocean to his own country) a small stick, with an iron nail, sharpened and fastened into one end of it; and a piece of white muslin, with several curious and strange figures painted on it in blue and red, by which, he said, his relations and countrymen would know the infant to be his son, and would receive it accordingly, on its arrival amongst them. . . He cut a lock of hair from his head, threw it upon the dead infant, and closed the grave with his own hands.

He then told us the God of his country was looking at him, and was pleased with what he had done (265).

Though the audience for slave narratives in the 19th century was largely comprised of white readers who believed that Africans were ‘heathen’ while still being human until saved by a Christian god, we see here that Bell, like other rhetors, was able to cleverly juxtapose ‘Africa’ as holy and the Americas as heathen in this burial scene precisely because the presence of the dead warranted some additional sympathy from the anticipated audience of white readers. In closing this Introduction, with this burial scene, as well as closing the dissertation with the analysis of the thanatope of burial, my intention is to invite others to stand ‘graveside’ and offer reflection on the transition between forms of life, contemplation on the kinds of death, and poetic offerings in the form of literary criticism that exhume what I have uncovered, and that build on the ground I have covered.

Literature Review of Thanatology

Aside from the repeated obligatory calls for more research on African diasporic thanatological discourse practices, scholarship in the field of Thanatology is curiously silent about death-related practices in North America, as well as the entirety of Africa! For example, in an otherwise fine synthesis of the *Social History of Dying* (2007) by Allan Kellehear, Africa is figured as the background where evolutionary pressures gave rise to homo death-related instincts but appears almost nowhere else in a complicated and prolonged analysis of our specie’s social history of dying. The 1980 collection *Death and Literature* edited by Robert F. Weir does include the poem ‘Go Down Death’ (1927) by James Weldon Johnson as well as an autobiographical essay by Alice Walker entitled,

‘To Hell With Dying,’ (1967), which Walker has also published as an illustrated children’s book. *The Harlem Book of the Dead* by Zee, Dodson and Billops (1978) with a forward by Toni Morrison stands as one interdisciplinary work in the field of thanatology that integrates history and literature into the analysis of one set of African Atlantic death ritual. The text is built around a collection of photographs from Harlem done by funeral parlor photographer James Van Der Zee in the 1920s, 30s and 40s. Morrison’s quotation of what she identifies as an African proverb is indicative of the ways that African traditions are imagined in the post Black Arts Movement period as the reference for memorialization of the dead. Morrison writes in the ‘Introduction’: “This is a remarkable concert of Black subject, Black poet, Black photographer and Black artist focus on the dead is significant for it is true what Africans say “The Ancestor lives as long as there are those who remember.””

Thanatologists working from the social sciences frequently overlook the knowledge to be gained from postslavery narratives and instead rely exclusively on survey instruments for data collection, thereby impoverishing the interpretation of that data. For example, while researchers Bert Hayslip Jr. and Cynthia A. Peveto do offer some contextualization for African American attitudes toward death in the volume *Cultural Changes in Attitudes Toward Death, Dying and Bereavement* (2005) when they write that black America’s orientation toward death should be “understood with reference to the struggle, violence, suppressed anger, and exploded aggression that have followed African Americans since the earliest days of slavery,” their interpretation is limited by the lack of a strengths-based understanding of African Atlantic thanatological practices that include the influences of West African cosmology in which proximity to death and the

dead accords the living power as well as presenting danger (31). Although Hayslip and Peveto's important follow-up findings to Kalish and Reynolds 1976 ground-breaking work on death and ethnicity are provocative and show that black Americans continue to have the highest exposure to death as measured by the number of survey respondents who reported personally knowing at least 8 people who have died, including a death in the last two years, Hayslip and Peveto's research does not take into account the cultural construction of death within African Atlantic cosmology whereby personal knowledge of a death maybe possible even if that death happened prior to the respondents birth (6). Hayslip and Peveto also found that African Americans report higher rates of "unexplainable feeling that they or someone else was about to die, they had experienced or felt the presence of someone after he or she died, and they had felt close to death themselves" than other non-black study participants were set "against the background" of the "preoccupation with violence and death ...in Black folklore, music, literature, art, and poetry," the reader is never treated to any explanation or example of how this context matters (31-33). Comparison of demographic statistics on mortality in North America reveals that black Americans have shorter life expectancies, higher fetal fatality rates, and worse outcomes for all major life-threatening diseases, thus providing a public health context for the findings.

Anthropologist Mary Bradbury in her social psychology analysis *Representations of Death* (1999) has argued that "an essential component of this [death] ritual process is the discourse that surrounds death" including literary representations and discourse (2). Thanatologists have increased their attention to the discourse that surrounds death in the last decade as the interdisciplinary field has expanded with the publication of both

undergraduate and graduate textbooks for training people to work with the dying. The monographs and edited collections *Death, Society, and Human Experience* (1977) by Kastenbaum, *Facing Death: Grief, Mourning and Death Ritual* (2001) edited by Hockey, Katz and Small, *Living with Dying: A Handbook for End-of-Life Practitioners* (2004) edited by Berzoff and Silverman, and *Living Through Loss: Interventions Across the Life Span* (2006) by Hooyman and Kramer represent scholarly efforts to engage with death and the discourse that enables, accompanies and follows from dying. Thanatological research from the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology and archeology that attempt to address the intersections of ‘race’ and death include *Death, Gender and Ethnicity* (1997) edited by Field, Hockey and Small, *Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross Cultural Reader* (2004) edited by Robben, and *Cultural Changes in Attitudes Toward Death, Dying and Bereavement* (2005) by Hayslip and Peveto. Despite this interdisciplinary outpouring of thanatological scholarship, Bradbury’s insight that death ritual must be understood through the discourse practices upon which death-related meaning and interpretation are premised is not operationalized in the case of the African Atlantic. Attention to black Atlantic death ritual in the extended Caribbean by thanatologists has, in general, ignored the explications of this ritual offered from within literary sources, including 20th century black literature.

Scholars in the field of African American literary theory have been engaged in the work of analyzing questions about the aesthetics of death and dying in the genre of the African American poetics since William Stanley Braithwaite pointed his audience toward the symbolic imagery of loss in James Weldon Johnson’s ‘O Black and Unknown Bards.’ Though early literary theory in African American letters did not focus explicitly on

‘death and dying,’ the context within which scholars, from Alain Lock to Zora Neale Hurston, read the slave narrative was such that questions about the ethics and aesthetics of representations of loss were implicit. Johnson’s wonder that “black slave singers, gone forgot, unfamed / Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine” is figured in Braithwaite’s 1925 essay ‘The Negro in American Literature’ as evidence of black literary accomplishment rather than analyzed as part of African American experiences with representing loss. Nonetheless, Braithwaite is implicitly addressing the necessity of understanding the experience of survival and loss through literary representation. Johnson’s poetry destigmatizes the losses wrought by enslavement and helps to enfranchise the bereaved through elegiac recall of the unrecognized dead (Braithwaite, 33). The latter half of the 20th century has witnessed a cascade of research and scholarship on both the slave narrative and neo-slave narrative -- the category under which the novels read in this dissertation comfortably fit.

As mentioned earlier, more recent critical literary analysis of death and dying include Sharon Patricia Holland’s theoretical exposition *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (2000), Karla FC Holloway’s 2002 collection of essays, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories*, Anissa Janine Wardi’s fine analysis of African American thanatology *Death and the Arc of Mourning in African American Literature* (2003), and Charlton McIlwain’s analysis of race, culture and funerary ritual practices *Death in Black and White: Death Ritual and Family Ecology* (2003). This dissertation expands on these discussions of thanatological rhetorics in 20th century fiction, and it also draws on important secondary literature from scientific and social scientific studies of death and dying. Among the revelatory findings had through

examination of the novels read in this dissertation is the idea that ‘dying’ is an activity that continues after death. Funerary scenes in African American fiction are ripe with examples of the dead inheriting gifts from the living for their posthumous journey. Slightly outside of the field of African American literature proper, but part of that extended Caribbean literature engaged with experiences of death and dying in the African diaspora, in Derek Walcott’s epic *Omeros*, for example, the hero Achilles crouches beside his beloved rival Hector’s grave and “whispered about their ancestral river, and those things he would recognize when he got there, his true home, forever and ever and ever, forever,” after which he lays an oar on his friend’s grave and cannot bring himself to say this prayer, “the spear that I give you, my friend, is only wood” (233). This passage intertextually touches the recollections of the South Carolinian ex-slave Charles Bell’s memories of burial, as well as signifying on the tradition of Classical Greek mythology. Though Hector’s death is also figured as ‘sleep’ in this funerary scene, the metaphor of travel or journey is preserved in that the decedent might still travel through the ‘night’ of death through dream. If the ‘journey’ is a major plot feature in postslavery narrative, then it is perhaps to be expected that the metaphor of ‘death as journey’ pervade the thanatological rhetoric reviewed herein. The ‘journey’ of the posthumous traveler is not over at biological death, but continues in the intergenerational transmission (or travel) of identity through story and memorialization.

Questions that the reader should find opened in the next four chapters, are: Why do thanatic tropes serve as the basis for the launch of political critiques against racial injustice? How does this rhetoric signify on and intervene in political discourse practices? The thanatic tropes identified herein can be thought of as ‘moments,’ or ‘steps’ in the

death and dying process, and I discuss each moment through a reading of texts selected for their influence in 20th century African American aesthetics, as well as their relationship to the tradition of African American creative writing and orature that stretches from Sojourner Truth to Charles Chesnutt, from James Baldwin to Octavia Butler. The structure of this dissertation presents the tropes of African American death ritual in a synthetic chronology that corresponds to the dying process out of convenience, but also because the form of the slave narrative is one that is chronologically realistic, usually beginning with birth and moving through until death. The course of the dissertation's argument tracks the (un)natural course of death and dying, moving from 'the diagnosis,' to the 'disease-course', 'the deathbed,' to the 'the burial and bereavement. Yet, one of the central arguments contained in 20th century African American fiction is that death is not a sequential experience, but rather cyclical. For example, memorialization shapes the context in which individuals receive diagnosis, palliation is achieved through mourning, and burial is a meta-trope that transcends the practice as applied to any one body. Nonetheless, my method of examination and the dissertation's interpretive progression present death ritual as linear in structure, from diagnosis through memorialization. This mirroring of the individual's subjective arch in death and dying proves a helpful organization for such a broad survey of source material. Organizing the analysis around these four moments in the progression of death ritual enables a tight conceptual focus around a coherent topic,

Through close readings and cultural analysis of death in a select few 20th century novels, I identify re-occurring thanatic rhetorics and tropes. Inventory of death scenes in African American fiction reveals common features of death ritual, including the doctor-

patient (iatric) encounter, aesthetic modes of palliation prior to death, community concern with the quality of transcendence, the offering of burial gifts for the decedent, and African influenced styles of funerary observance. Cataloguing death these texts accomplishes three things. First, this survey provides an overview of the forms of death ritual in the literature, and secondly, it begins to reveal a pattern that would not be evident by a few close readings alone. Thirdly, I hope that this dissertation will offer signposts to scholars who desire to do more detailed analysis of specific texts or to delve into the dynamics of one moment of death ritual. While I perform close readings of several novels that have not yet been worked through in previous efforts to read death and literature together, the central accomplishment of this project then, is the linkage of representational practices in 20th century fiction with African American deathart in everyday life.

The experiences of Africans in the Americas has included survival of hundreds of years segregated into a economic niche characterized by radical oppression, sexual exploitation, and genocidal dehumanization. Dehumanization is necessarily a linguistic process; recognition of humanity happens in the course of interpersonal establishment of intimacy through shared discourse. Discourse that necessarily destroys the abjected speaker and devalued recipient is a preface for dehumanization during the course of death and dying. Conversely, the *praeter-natural*, that state of being premortem, that space occupied by those who are not-yet-dead, the undead, the revenant. Then, there is the post-mortem state, the category of posthumous entity, of human memory, or a 'life' next to or adjacent to the carbon life, the organism respiring, the electromagnetically void of encephalopathic death -- this legally regulated and medically defined status as 'dead'

verifies one as human with a rhetorical force that generates archives. Hence, death and dying have been an arena wherein Africans in America, both because of the un-natural incidence of death, the violent morbidity, and the mortality-correlated conditions of apartheid, and the profound necessity for African Americans to utilize and leverage all possible resources, death being one that is primary to the human condition.

Death and dying is a guaranteed and inalienable, in addition to denoting and connoting an idiomatic weight in Anglo American political, legal, and religious discourse. African Americans have leveraged the occasion of death to resist dehumanization through the display and fulfillment of ceremonial death art including obituary, eulogy, and elegy. Material death arts such as monumentation, gravesite ceremonial and reverential offering, ritual burial observations that involve transfer of the body, and memorial productions. The clearest intersection of linguistic deatharts and material deatharts is the practice of naming -- naming the newly alive after the dead is the tribute death art that clearly engraves the identity of the dead into our shared material existence. Reverential naming meant to ensure some posthumous existence has grave significance in the shared idiolect and death art significations in many cultures. This dissertation understands the dynamics of death and dying in the experience of African America by reading the corpus of literary evidence produced in the 20th century, the rhetorical context of African American creative writers, and the contemporary critical conversation happening on the aesthetics of African American art forms, including deathart. Discussion of death art aesthetics, the and implication of death art aesthetics in the political discourse of African American and anti-colonial social justice struggles. Critics have a broad accreting discussion of deathart; the center of discursive gravity is

heavy -- death -- but the accrued idiolect of critics has not spiralled tightly enough that the field is suffocatingly coiled around a theoretical orthodoxy. Interpretation of death art, and the most prominent African American deathart in the 20th century, the novel, has been promiscuous. Literary theory has borrowed from many academic disciplines in thinking about death and dying, and death and dying is overrepresented in African American art entire. Again, one can hardly be surprised that the theme of death and the aesthetics of deathart and ritual is a preoccupation for African America, given the history of racial morbidity.

The field of literary criticism on African American deathart, and 20th century African American literary criticism's reception of novels that foreground death and dying coalesce around the recognition that death is a sign that is also an event beyond signification in the passage of the linguistic subject, the transcendence of the ego. Death is figured by literary critics not in the terms of that great theoretical conversation about the 'death of the author' being had on the terms of Anglo American and Continental literary theory, but in terms of those writing on the legal theory of death and representation coming out of the second World War. The rhetorical context of criticism and the confluence of African America's social justice struggle in the U.S. political economy has influenced the reading of works about death and dying with an emphasis on themes of recognition, dehumanization, and the importance of language in creating the conditions of living and dying in the work of 20th century literary giants like James Baldwin or Toni Morrison. This dissertation benefits from understanding the representations of death and dying in the novels analyzed herein from the continuous reminder that death is so ubiquitous that examination of death frequently occurs as a

meta-criticism, or as invective against political oppression. The tropes of death and dying typical in African American 20th century fiction, or thanatropes have as their contextual reference the conditions of black morbidity occurring in discourse. Discursive constructions of black identity in the history of North America have been legalistic: the definition of African American humanity has a precedent and legalistic idiolect reflected in the form and content of African American novels. Yet, throughout the following chapters, allow the title of this Introduction and the following anecdote to remind us that death is beyond discourse, that death like discourse goes ‘all the way down’ to borrow the expression.

Novelistic Deathart & Praxis

"Take flight, take flight brother, take flight" were the words of an African American minister prayed softly at the deathbed of a young man whose life was ending in a hospital in Columbia South Carolina where I worked as a social worker intern in Palliative Care, a field up-stream from Hospice. This death was, like many I witnessed, a moment when the use of poetics and spoken word helped ease the suffering of the one dying and their family. After the passing, the Minister and I in awaiting the family's slow departure from the deathbed and body and arrival into the area reserved for mourners had the opportunity to talk about the topic of my dissertation, the tradition of black meditation on the meaning of loss, and the continued unresolved grief in many African American families over the conditions of loss, as well as the mortuary rituals and death rites that have enabled African America to face the conditions of black death with courage and hope for transcendence. Two pieces of advice he offered on the topic included the observation that death is a community experience in black life, and secondly that death is

similar to other catastrophic absences inflicted on black families in U.S. history, from enslavement through the current era of mass imprisonment. He said: "if a young man sent to jail, then he gone; if a young man sold out into slavery, then he gone; if a young man goes missing, then he gone, if a young man goes crazy, then he gone." These equations between death, dis-ease, incarceration, and enslavement aren't novel, the critical scholarship is ripe with examinations of these relationships as refracted through gender, class status, religious identity, sexual orientation, and regional background. However, it was compelling for me to understand the reverberation of death tropes, or thanatropes in African American literature that are taken up and cycled through the experiences of death had in medical settings by African American patients. Just two examples of the trope of 'flight' foreground the rich inter-textual relationship between novelistic writing and death for African America: the 1977 novel *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison, the most celebrated user of thanatic themes and death-tropes in the 20th century, and 1993 *Parable of the Sower* by the late science fiction writer Octavia Butler. Both novels feature the metaphor of flight in a central way to answer the question: How can art represent the essential human experience of death, particularly when the creative context is one of extreme violence, such as the death of the young man described above. The insight offered by this Minister in conversation with a young social worker after the passing of the beloved son of a large extended family fore-grounded for me that literature and life mirror each other, and that death and art are inseparable aspects of our species ancient search for a pattern to understand transitions, ending and transcendence through the circulation of shared thanatropes, such as flight.

The late award winning author Octavia Butler in 1993 novel *The Parable of the Sower* includes a protracted consideration by the protagonist on the life of birds. This example of flight as a thanatope that is called into use for interpretive and argumentative purposes, whether at the deathbed of a young man in a hospital, or in a piece of post-apocalyptic science fiction piece where zombies lay siege to the those living inside the gates of the law. In the scene of the actual deathbed, the metaphor of flight was invoked palliatively to enable the dying and his family to imagine his journey as liberation for the constraints of mortal human corporeality. In the literary example, the protagonist begins to feel that she is about to join the living-dead and that the outcome of the class warfare will be gruesome for those living inside the confines of the gate. Butler presents the protagonists decision not to kill birds as a palliative ritual to relieve death anxiety. The hope for 'flight' in the moment of actual death, and the hope for flight in literary representations are just two examples of a ubiquitous trend in African American fiction, poetry, orature, dance, multimedia installation and sculpture. For example, poet and philosopher Kwame Dawes has used the language 'impossible flight' as an allegory of postcolonial identity. The dream of transcendence and travel to a beautiful place, prior to or after the atrocities of colonialism, is fantastical, yet inescapably part of the cultural imaginary configured by the history of black corporeality being a condition wherein death and escape are often figured as one and the same. Exploration of the ways that the most prominent thanatopes are represented in a sample of African American fiction has illustrated to me many times over that deathart is a significant resource for imagining the subjectivity of the person with terminal diagnosis, disease course, or contemplating burial on their deathbed.

Approaching eight examples of novelistic deathart written by men and women in the 20th century, and interpreting the thanatropes in coupled novels, it is appropriate to pause with respect for the subject, and for the dead. Novels are deathart in 20th century African America like obelisk tomb-stones on 19th century upper-class Anglo American graves -- they engrave a history, record the cause, bracket a story of individual and community life within the dates of birth and passing, commemorate the fulfillment of obligation between the living and the dead, memorialize the identity and transcendence of an individual to the status of ancestor and benefactor. Novels are the locations where the metaphorical corpse of African America's history is buried in a mortuary ritual that is honorific, memorial, and conciliatory.

CHAPTER 2

DIAGNOSIS: “YOU KNOW HOW DANGEROUS IT IS TO WEAR DARK SKIN”

“You see...he has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life. Understand. Understand? It’s worse than that. He register with his senses but short-circuits his brain. Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he doesn’t digest it. Already he is --- well, bless my soul! Behold! A walking zombie.”

-The Vet, *Invisible Man*, 94

“The cause of death for these black men was, strictly speaking, not physical at all, not a material failure in the usual sense, though their affliction is perhaps the oldest disease in the world. It cannot be empirically measured, or even perceived through instrumentation - - we know it through its symptoms, yet despite its mystery, it is invariably the cause of death. I am speaking...of the belief in personal identity, the notion that *what* we are is somehow distinct from other things when this entity, this lie, this ancient stupidity has no foundation in scientific fact...For the sake of argument, suppose individuality is a fact. What do you feel just now? Foxglove on the wind? The solidity of stone beneath us? The bark at our backs? Now be frank, is it reasonable to say that, since these sensations appear, there must be a separate entity that perceives them? We do not *have* a sensation of solidity; we *are* the sensation Andrew.’

‘Then you are calling identity a lie?’

‘Vanity.’

- The Vet, *Oxherding Tale*, 58

In the epigraphs opening this chapter we are offered two diagnoses for cause of death. The diagnoses diverge in that the first hypothesizes death as a consequence of deficiency in language, meaning, and identity. The second presents the opposing diagnosis: an excess of meaning, discourse, and identification with the ‘self.’ Like the quotation in the chapter title drawn from a poem from Lucille Clifton’s collection

Blessing the Boats (2000), both diagnoses concur that black identity is the primary risk factor for death. Diagnosis of causes for black morbidity, from the moribund patient to the death-sentenced protagonist present mortal risk as occurring within the relations of power negotiated by African Americans in the construction of 'racial' identity.

The protagonist (IM) of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is without a 'Self,' and thus a zombie, among the living dead. The protagonist of Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*, Andrew, is delivered a terminal diagnosis of self-certainty; he is a revenant -- an undead wanderer, or refugee anticipating death. While critical literature often figures the IM as awaiting rebirth, he can more properly be understood as awaiting resuscitation from his postmortem state of living death.¹ Andrew's tale escape from enslavement, fugitive life, and racial 'passing' has been critically received as consistent with the generic template of neo-slave narrative, but the character's death-bound subjectivity has yet to be explored.² The event of diagnosis in both cases can be defined as a type of discernment, or the progressive selection of the best answer between paired choices used to differentiate between explanations in order to arrive at the most accurate and probable answer to the question, "What is wrong?" Diagnosis can be a noun, an answer, a thing that is static.³ Yet, it is also a process, an action, a verb as the progressive selection of the best answer between paired choices never comes to an end but rather circles the question

¹ See Ross Posnock, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*, Cambridge, U.K.; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2005, for a discussion of Ellison's critical reception and the interpretation of IM's character as variously suffering social death, awaiting resurrection, or anticipating rebirth.

² Stephen Lucasi, 'False to the Past: Charles Johnson's Parabiographical Fiction,' *Critique*, Jul 01, 2011; Vol. 52, No. 3, p. 288-312; Ashraf Rushdy, 'Charles Johnson's Way to Spiritual Literature,' *African American Review*, Jun 01, 2009; Vol. 43, No. 2/3, p. 401-412; Gary Storhoff, *Understanding Charles Johnson*, Columbia : University of South Carolina Press, 2004.

³ Sheila Sparks Ralph, Cynthia M. Taylor, *Sparks and Taylor's Nursing Diagnosis Reference Manual*,

³Philadelphia : Wolters Kluwer Health/Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2014.

of ‘what is wrong?’ in endless spirals of refinement.⁴ Used in medical expressions, diagnosis is also a form of etiology, theory of origins, a version of history, as well as a prognosis, theory of endings, a type of prophecy.⁵ Used more generally and in its full historical sense, the idea of diagnosis allows for an answer that includes consideration of intergenerational patterns, historical inequity, and continuing apartheid in the U.S. medical system for racial and gendered disparities in mortality.⁶

Diagnosis, in Ralph Ellison’s 1947 epic fiction *The Invisible Man* & Charles Johnson’s neo-slave narrative *Oxherding Tale*, hinges on the dialectics between ‘dying life’ and ‘living death.’ The space between these two terms, and the tension generated in the effort of each novel’s protagonist to determine an answer to the question “What is wrong?” is explored in this chapter through the lens of ‘race,’ gender and the historical construction of these two features of African American identity in literature. Much like the older poetic traditions of black orature, African American literature of the 20th century, the health of the individual is prominently represented as aligned with the health of the entire community.⁷ Environmental exposure to unlivable work conditions, acute forms of racial violence, chronic disease risks, and limited access to medical care all offer context for the diagnosis offered by creative writers in 20th century African American

⁴ R. Douglas Collins, *Differential Diagnosis in Primary Care*, Philadelphia, PA : Wolters Kluwer Health/Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2012; Bolling JL. Guinea Across the Water, ‘The African American Approach to Death and Dying,’ In: Parry JK, Ryan AS, eds. *A Cross-Cultural Look at Death, Dying and Religion*. Chicago, Ill: Nelson-Hall Publishers; 1995:145-159.

⁵ Ronald A. Moline. *The Diagnosis and Treatment of Dissociative Identity Disorder : a Case Study and Contemporary Perspective*, Lanham, Md. : Jason Aronson, 2013.

⁶ Paul C. Rosenblatt and Beverly R. Wallace, *African American Grief: Series in Death Dying & Bereavement*, New York: Routledge, 2005; Dorothy Robert, *Killing the Black Body; Race Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty*, New York: Vintage Books, 1997; Stephanie Mitchem, *African American Folk Healing*, New York: New York University Press, 2007; Emilie M. Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death; African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998.

⁷ Thurman H. *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, Richmond, Ind: Friends United Press; 1975.

literature.⁸ The cost to individual and community health caused by the presence of chronic stress, threats of violence, and episodic acute trauma are explicated by Ralph Ellison and Charles Johnson from differing perspectives that are rooted in their respective spiritual frames of reference.⁹ Both Johnson and Ellison are diagnosticians, searching for an explanation to the question of causality for racial disparities in mortality among black men; in reading their divergent diagnosis I examine the operation of identity as at once a risk factor as well as protective factor against morbid racial violence that occurs in and through language.¹⁰

Both Ralph Ellison and Charles Johnson in their mutual use of the pseudonym ‘Vet,’ reflect on the history of African American experiences with death and dying, and the relationship between diagnosis, identity, and death.¹¹ Ellison foregrounds the history of African American servicemen with the term, while also invoking and inverting the history of white physicians acting as ‘veterinarians’ on plantations during slavery.¹² Ellison’s Vet is a dishonored black WWI physician institutionalized and hopeless about the potential for his diagnostic power to save lives. Despite the Vet’s skill as a surgical specialist, he is devalued and threatened with death for practicing medicine by white vigilantes. When the protagonist and his obligate company, Mr. Norton, the elderly

⁸ Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000; Anissa Janine Wardi, *Death and the Arc of Mourning in African American Literature*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003.

⁹ John Whalen-Bridge, Gary Storhoff, eds., *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, Albany : SUNY Press, 2009. Braun KL, Pietsch JH, Blanchette PL, eds. *Cultural Issues in End-of-Life Decision-Making*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publishers; 2000.

¹⁰ Sullivan MA. May the circle be unbroken: The African American Experience of death, dying and spirituality. In: Parry JK, Ryan AS, eds. *A Cross-Cultural Look at Death, Dying and Religion* . Chicago, Ill: Nelson-Hall Publishers; 1995.

¹¹ Barrett RK. Contemporary African American funeral rites and traditions. In: DeSpelder LA, Strickland A, eds. *The Path Ahead: Readings in Death and Dying* . Mountain View, Calif: Mayfield Publishing Co; 1995.

¹² WPA testimonial by survivors of enslavement are ripe with accounts of non-consensual medical interventions performed on the bodies of enslaved blacks.

narcissistic white patron of the fictionalized Tuskegee University where IM is a star student find themselves before the Vet's judgement after Mr. Norton lapses into catatonia while entrusted to the care of IM, the diagnostic scene ensues. Norton is a vampiric figure, irrepressibly drawn to hear a black sharecropper's story of incest, he suffers a dissociative seizure caused by his own stuporific traumatic memory of incest with his own deceased daughter. IM, fearing for Mr. Norton's life brings him to a brothel/saloon servicing black mental health patients where IM appeals to the Vet for his help on Norton's behalf. His relationship to African Americans and interest in the school as his "destiny" is an overcompensatory distraction, a substitution of attention, from the memories of his daughter's incest-related death, which Mr. Norton's narcissistic ego cannot bear. The Vet's patience with Norton's affliction, as well as the zombie condition of the young IM quickly wears thin; the Vet regards them both as better off dead. In this scene of diagnosis, the young black man is figured as a zombie, the elderly white philanthropist as a vampire of black life, and the black physician as the impossible and abjected subject unable to inhabit the racially oppressive pre-WWII U.S. social order.¹³ In the course of the novel, the protagonist migrates regionally, psychologically, emotionally, and discursively in his struggle to understand his morbid diagnosis and to recover, uncover, or discover the antidote to zombie life.¹⁴

Oxherding Tale's diagnostic scene features ignominious white physician turned veterinarian exploiting the niche created by enslavers demand for death-related 'care' on the plantation Leviathan. The young biracial protagonist of the story, Andrew, receives

¹³ Marisa Parham, *Haunting and Displacement in African American Literature and Culture*, New York: Routledge, 2009.

¹⁴ Jerry W. Ward Jr., Maryemma Graham, *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, New York : Cambridge University Press, 2011.

an unsolicited terminal diagnosis at the graveside of his occupational predecessor, the sex slave of the middle-aged white widow plantation mistress Flo Hatfield -- a character who spiritually and psychologically cannibalises her victims through sexual exploitation. The enslaved men Flo exploits die when, after having their egos artificially buoyed by false recognition of their humanity, they are discarded to labor unto death in a local mine after Flo has had her cannibal fill. Having an intact sense-of-self is a catastrophic liability once these men are refused intersubjective acknowledgement.¹⁵ The Vet shares the diagnosis and prognosis with Andrew as they clandestinely observe the burial of a former sex-slave; the mourning ritual presided over by the descendant's father Reb, known as the Coffinmaker on Leviathan. The Vet takes Andrew by surprise at the graveside, only revealing his presence with the unexpected commentary on the quality of the dead Patrick's passing, "At least he was spared the mines, eh?"(56). Andrew begins to feel his heart 'break' -- the onset symptom of his terminal disease-course. The protagonist arrives to Leviathan self-certain; possessed with the conceit that he is in 'control' of his own heart, he is determined to earn wages enough in servitude to Flo that he eventually buy back his, and his family's lives, marry his girlfriend, (a young slave-girl named Minty), and fulfill his father's dream of a redeemed black life -- free, sovereign, and full of 'Self.'

Invisible Man and *Oxherding Tale* offer scenes of diagnosis for protagonists attempting to navigate the complexities of identity as racialized selves in an psychosocial context that morbidly configured for black men.

Each novel offers a rhetorical context for the imaginings of black masculinity that foregrounds the historical conditions of lethal inhospitality toward black men; IM

¹⁵ Jeffrey Leak, *Racial Myths and Masculinity in African American Literature*, Knoxville : University of Tennessee Press, 2004.

inhabits pre-Civil Rights Era America, and Andrew the 19th century.¹⁶ Both texts grapple with the historical trajectory of the environmental contributors to ‘blackness’ as a terminal diagnosis for men in the mid-20th century U.S.¹⁷ The diagnosis of living death in IM’s case, or a death-bound life in Andrew’s are both conditions that continue to afflict and kill black men in the moment of each novel’s publication.¹⁸ The curative efforts, the therapeutic interventions, the antidotal approaches that each protagonists attempts in their struggles to survive, and be fully alive, fail in the moment, yet create the possibility of future resurrection. Each experiences a temporary transcendence of racial violence in ‘passing’ that creates the potential for a return from the afterlife as more than simply soon-to-be decedents of white supremacist society.¹⁹ IM remains a zombie, although a self-consciously invisible one (embracing the homeostasis of sensory life while awaiting reanimation). Though he claims to be in hibernation and that “all sickness is not unto death, neither is invisibility,” he is nonetheless socially dead, even while awaiting the opportunity for reanimation.²⁰ So to Andrew; his racial death in ‘passing’ allows him to consolidate an ego and afford ‘life-assurance,’ however, he becomes a revenant, a socially dead wanderer awaiting reanimation as a ‘self’ in the life of his ancestral community.

¹⁶ Elaine B. Richardson and Ronald L. Jackson II, *African American Rhetoric(s) : Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Carbondale : Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.

¹⁷ Hines Smith S. End-of-life care decision-making processes of African American families: Implications for culturally sensitive social work practice. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press; 2004:13(2).

¹⁸ Ronald L. Jackson II, Elaine B. Richardson, *Understanding African American Rhetoric : Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations*, New York : Routledge, 2003.

¹⁹ Ronald L. Jackson II, Elaine B. Richardson, *Understanding African American Rhetoric : Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations*, New York : Routledge, 2003.

²⁰ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death : a Comparative Study*, Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1982.

Diagnosis in Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* & Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* hinges on the dialectics between 'dying life' and 'living death.' The space between these two terms, and the tension generated in the effort of each novel's protagonist to determine an answer to the question "What is wrong?" is explored in this chapter through the lens of 'race,' gender and the historical construction of these two features of African American identity in literature. In African American literature of the 20th century, the health of the individual is prominently represented as aligned with the health of the entire community.²¹ Environmental exposure to unlivable work conditions, acute forms of racial violence, chronic disease risks, and limited access to medical care all offer context for the diagnosis offered by creative writers in 20th century African American literature. The cost to individual and community health caused by the presence of chronic stress, threats of violence, and episodic acute trauma are explicated by Ralph Ellison and Charles Johnson from differing perspectives that are rooted in their respective spiritual frames of reference.²² Both Johnson and Ellison are diagnosticians, searching for an explanation to the question of causality for racial disparities in mortality among black men; in reading their divergent diagnosis I examine the operation of identity as at once a risk factor as well as protective factor against morbid racial violence that occurs in and through language.

Reading *Invisible Man* through the diagnosis of living-death due to a deficit in language, awareness, self-recognition, or the absence of ego, this chapter examines the

²¹ Charles A. Corr, Clyde M. Nabe, Donna M. Corr, eds., *Death and Dying, Life and Living*, Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2009.

²² DE Balk, C Wogrin, G Thornton, DK Meagher, eds. *Handbook of Thanatology: The Essential Body of Knowledge for the Study of Death, Dying, and Bereavement*, The Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC), 2007

protagonist's identity formation and efforts to construct a self through language use. In reading *Oxherding Tale* through the diagnosis of too much ego, a hyper-awareness of the power of language this chapter foregrounds the protagonist's survival strategy as one of 'race' suicide and alliance with the illusion of patriarchal identity. Beginning with *Invisible Man* and moving onto *Oxherding Tale*, the argument explores themes of definition of 'self' through diagnosis, negotiations of identity through language, reconciliation of family through passing, and the gendering of diagnosis through sexual expression. Ultimately, this reading hopes to reveal one answer to the question "what's going (wr)on(g)?" in representations of death and identity in African American literature by utilizing the trope of diagnosis.

Defining the 'Self' Through Diagnosis

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* explores the exigencies of U.S. becoming a 'Self' in relationship to U.S. racial logics; the text remains much as it did when it was first published in 1952, an iconoclastic rebuke as well as tribute to literary traditions and generic conventions. By framing the 'Self' within a double consciousness defined by death and diagnosis, a definition concerned both with specific iterations of 'race' in an U.S. social context and with an expressive orientation toward canonical western texts, *Invisible Man* complicates the very terms and assumptions that characterized black masculinity as a conceptual property at mid-century. Ellison's novelistic explorations of the substance of 'Self,' and its relationship to race ran counter not only to general assumptions about canonical literature, but also to the accepted conventions of 'Negro

literature at the time of its publication, and the text remains a challenge to contemporary critics.²³

“Identity,” declared Ralph Ellison in “The Art of Fiction: An Interview,” is “*the* American theme. The nature of our society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are” (*Shadow and Act* 177). *Invisible Man*’s protagonist is searching for ‘Self’; staging a recovery from his unnatural state of living-death, escaping from the morbid diagnosis of egoless zombiehood by moving through layers of language to identify a discourse that is livable as a black man. Ultimately, his efforts fail to fully re-animate him -- rather he ends his journey underneath language, in the cozy warm space beneath the streets of ‘racial’ identity and social life. His arduous journey of meaning-making propels him from a naive student, to industrial laborer, to a hospitalized lobotomy patient, to political organizer, to underground-dweller beneath. This final stop beneath the City is a location where the language of identity drains down to a formless process of becoming a ‘Self’ -- a ‘Being’ that is simply the confluence of sensory information and response -- an ossuary for the socially dead IM. The morbid diagnosis of zombiehood follows the Invisible Man in his efforts to recover from the dis-ease of living death at each narrative turn. Nevertheless, Ellison’s literary play manages to formulate black masculine identity as a ‘moving-target’ in language, escaping the diagnosis of a living-death as well as the death-bound life seen in *Oxherding Tale*.

As Invisible Man navigates a litany of tragic and comic experiences, his ability to understand their meaning lies just beyond him. Invisible Man’s experiences at his

²³ Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin wrote respectively between the end of World War II and the Civil Rights Movement. Wright published his Dostoevskian-story “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1945) and Baldwin published his classic jeremiad *The Fire Next Time* (1963). In between, Ellison published *Invisible Man* (1947) to the chagrin of many of his contemporaries and colleagues who received his work as insufficiently aimed toward social justice struggle.

Southern Negro College and his subsequent northern migration are the hallmarks of the classic bildungsroman: the work of identity formation.²⁴ The Vet's diagnosis that IM is a zombie without a 'self' however, contradicts the conventions of bildungsroman. In "Society, Morality, and the Novel," Ellison asserts that "the novel is obsessed with the impact of change upon personality...Its appearance marked the fulfillment of a social need that arose out of the accelerated process of historical change" (*Going* 244). "Conscious awareness of values" is what Ellison calls "the American experiment" of identity formation-- novel, then, was a necessary expressive mode for 'Self' development. When Ellison published *IM*, 'conscious awareness' of 'Self' motivated African American struggles to construct a livable version of black masculinity, a 'Self' not tied to death by 'passing' like Andrew, nor living-death in the absence of ego like IM (248). Wrestling with the specificity of 'racial' identity at the intersection of death and gender, IM's search for antidote to his morbid condition includes the momentary psychoacoustic transcendence of the category 'Man' in favor of 'human' -- a move to be examined more closely below. What is clear is that *Invisible Man* is Ellison's alchemic antidote to the diagnosis of living-death, a mix of narrativization, socio-historical revision, and linguistic prescription -- readers are immersed in the experience of repeated moments of clarification swiftly laminated by another seal of deadening discourse, while simultaneously encounters the deracination of those layers of language. Ellison fuses generic conventions in his discursive experimentation: the cultural, historical, socio-political matrix that is the literary improvisation *Invisible Man*.²⁵

²⁴ See Stella Blaki, *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction*. New York, NY : Rodopi, 2011 for a discussion of this genre, though about women's literature, it is a very insightful source.

²⁵ Harold Bloom, ed., *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*, New York : Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009.

The diagnostic scheme used by the Vet includes evaluation of presenting symptoms; IM can “register with his senses but short-circuits his brain. Nothing has meaning,” and these symptoms persist in the hole where we first meet IM -- a hole that is not, we are told by the narrator, “damp and cold like a grave,” but rather, “warm and full of light” (6). IM’s retrospection on the futile search for a habitable social identity from this warm space of sensory overload sounds much like the posthumous reflection of one speaking from the afterlife in narrative fiction. Reconciled to social death as the most tolerable treatment for managing his condition, IM sequesters himself in the abandoned basement of an old apartment building under New York City where he listens to body-vibrating Jazz, smokes marijuana, and syphons-off energy from the city electrical grid to brilliantly light his “hole in the ground” (6). Zombie stasis is not one of ‘deadness,’ the narrator argues, saying “I am neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation...I am in a state of hibernation” (6), however, the narrator’s estimation of his condition denies the original diagnosis from which he has not recovered. IM’s strategy of social withdrawal and retreat to the warm, bright hole of his newly created home is unsatisfactory as a antidote to living-death, and, at the same time, it is sadly the most successful form of pain management discovered in the course of the narrative. Sensory perception becomes constitutive of an identity that, though socially unrecognizable, is still validated by as ‘self’ through intensification of tactile, auditory, visual and olfactory information. IM’s adamant denial that he is not dead, that this hole is not a grave, merely begs the question of denial and death anxiety; the underbelly of his denial reveals IM’s acknowledgement of ‘self’ as an iteration of zombie sensory-statis: “there is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to *feel* its vibration, not only with my ear but with

my whole body”(8). This home, like ‘home-goings’ in African American ritual imaginings of the afterlife, is conciliation for the one transcending the social world of hardship and racial violence. At the close of the story, IM’s ‘self’ is still ‘short-circuited’ by the unlivable condition of life as a self-identified black man in racist U.S. society.

Ellison protagonist imagines recovery from the morbid diagnosis is possible if he is able to discover the antidotal idiolect, he searches for a therapeutic social ecology that enables dignified life for black men. Expulsion from University after the debauched oversight of a wealthy white patron’s visit compels him to seek employment in the City, where he experiments with working-class industrial life, class-based political orientation, and the adoption of an urban playboy gambler identity. His search for a curative language is futile. The hope of escape from living-death or the death-bound life through the construction of a new identity, whether dissolved or consolidated in language is never realized, but the possibility occurs inside each narrative turn, and at the level of the text itself for readers. Ellison conjures the potential of language to function as a cure for all terminal death-by-identity diagnoses in the scene where IM discovers the power of his own voice in the admittedly momentary and fleeting act of public speech: “words rippled from my solar plexus...I hear the pulse of your [the audience’s] breathing...I feel, I feel...suddenly that I have become *more human*...more human. Not that I have become a man, for I was born a man. But that I am more human” (345-6). We see the shifting shape of IM’s masculinity in this passage; gender identity no longer hangs on the hook of a ‘racial’ self imagined in the discourses available in U.S. social life, whether as an aspirant ‘race’ man, a Brother in communist struggle, or as a Rhinehart kaleidoscoping through urban life -- IM has transcended ‘man’ in favor of ‘human’ -- a movement that is enabled

by the brief coupling of body and mind, or “senses” and “brain” (94). In this moment, IM briefly experiences the possibility of recovery from living death, “I feel...the new is being born and the vital old revived. In each of you, in me, in us all” (346). Here, in a scene of address from IM to an audience of white Communist activists eager to cultivate a nominally interracial class-based movement, the potential for intersubjective recognition and the coupling of ‘being’ in language with sensory perception of the ‘Self’ is an example of Ellison’s illustrative skill; we see black masculinity migrate out of necessity. IM must find familial ground with the crowd of activist awaiting his announcements of brotherly solidarity for the “CITIZENS OF TOMORROW’S WORLD!” (346). The phenomenon of ego dissolution, rebirth, and consolidation explored through the use of literary experimentation, succeeds in expanding the space for livable versions of black masculinity for IM, as well as the protagonist of *Oxherding Tale*, Andrew. Finally then, Ellison’s novelistic diagnosis, and his exploration of the “short-circuit” of language interrupting, confounding, and dampening the discursive signal of ‘Self,’ are negotiated in language -- a language that inherently carries the historical residue of racial violence.

Negotiations of Identity through Language

The differences between the protagonist of *IM* and of *Oxherding Tale* is not so great; each is given a terminal diagnosis, and both struggles to attain a livable identity through various linguistic means. At the register of narrative and at the register of text, language operates as an *astodan*, an elevated structure used to dispose of the dead through environmental exposure. The remembered identity of the dead in the community of living survivors is exposed to the contingencies of the psychosocial environment

wherein survivors tear off pieces of the posthumous body for incorporation into ancestral life.²⁶ For the dying, foreknowledge that one's memory will be astodanically served to survivors for reintegration into the whole is assurance of an afterlife.²⁷ Continuity of 'Self' after death is a palliative concept for one suffering death anxiety.²⁸ Anticipatory loss of the 'Self' and the obliterations of one's identity at death is a terrifying certitude eased by the prospect of posthumous remembrance and continued participation in community life through memorial tribute by survivors and descendants in African America.²⁹ This is the promise held-out to the dying by empathic listeners across spiritual traditions: at the deathbed the dying can project their identity beyond death by offering survivors last words, wishes and death-bed instructions, insight and wisdom.³⁰ The story *IM*'s narrator shares of his grandfather's deathbed confession creates a continuity of 'self' for said grandfather in the audience, and sustains something of the grandfather's identity through storytelling. The confession is an invective, an instructional, and indictment: *IM*'s grandfather had malingered zombiehood while harboring an secretly consolidated-ego. *IM*'s grandfather claims the identity of traitor, his deathbed directive being,

“Son, after I’m gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy’s country ever since I gave up my gone back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome’em with yeses, undermine’em with grins, agree’em to death and destruction, let’em swoller you till they vomit and bust wide open”(16).

²⁶ Nancy C. Reeves, 'Death Acceptance Through Ritual,' *Death Studies*, May 01, 2011; Vol. 35, No. 5, p. 408-419.

²⁷ Douglas J. Davies, *Death, Ritual, and Belief : the Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*, London ; Washington, D.C. : Cassell, 1997.

²⁸ Ralph Houlbrooke, ed., *Death, Ritual, and Bereavement*, New York : Routledge in association with the Social History Society of the United Kingdom, 1989.

²⁹ Charlton McIlwain, *Death in Black and White : Death, Ritual and Family Ecology*, Cresskill, N.J. : Hampton Press, 2003.

³⁰ Bryan J. Cuevas and Jacqueline I. Stone, eds., *The Buddhist Dead : Practices, Discourses, Representations*, Honolulu : University of Hawai'i Press, 2007; Sue Fawn Chung and Priscilla Wegars, eds. *Chinese American Death Rituals : Respecting the Ancestors*, Lanham, MD : AltaMira Press, 2005.

Yet, dying as a traitor, whether to whites or blacks, offers no protection from the indignity of racial oppression. IM's grandfather dies an old man, but without the benefit of his family gathered around his bedside, the children are exiled from the room and his last wishes are rejected social recognition by palliative listeners. Until the moment of ultimate confession and disclosure, he is not accorded space to speak his truth without fear of retribution. At death, his hope for continuity of that consolidated-ego rides on the audience of listener's faithful remembrance of deathbed directives, a remembrance that would thereby grant him a posthumous afterlife in community memory.³¹ IM's grandfather dies with the disrespect of being refused a deathbed audience when the "younger children" are "rushed from the room" and IM is "warned emphatically to forget" his Grandfather's deathbed revelation (16).

Ellison is writing within and against the social ecology of post-WWII U.S. society -- an ecology informed by the history of black engagement with Christian themes of birth, death, and resurrection (Ellison as a disaffected Christian, Johnson an avowed Buddhist).³² The Christian trope of death, resurrection and rebirth in Ellison's *Invisible Man* stands in contrast to Johnson's meditation on Being and self from a Buddhist perspective.³³ Ellison's protagonist is faced with the task of divesting and reinvesting in

³¹ Peter Metcalf, Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death : the Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, New York : Cambridge University Press, 1991.

³² See Qiana J. Whitted, *"A god of justice?" : the Problem of Evil in Twentieth-Century Black Literature*, Charlottesville : University of Virginia Press, 2009, for an overview of tropes presented in African American creative writing. Paul Harvey, *Through the Storm, through the Night : a History of African American Christianity*, Lanham, Md. : Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011, for a discussion of the relationship between black social justice struggle and Christianity.

³³ African American engagement with Eastern philosophical and spiritual traditions is a rich and complicated area of study, particularly the relationship between death and identity.. In an interview African American author and critic bell hooks asked revered Buddhist nun Pema Chodron about this relationship, "It seems so much of our longing to escape suffering arises from the sense that the closer we are to suffering, the closer we are to death." To which Chodron relied, "For me, the spiritual path has always been

new discursive strategies for recovery from the morbid diagnosis, much as Ellison attempts at the level of the text to exploit the lexical gap in definitions of death to explore black masculinity. Although Ellison and Johnson work from distinct spiritual traditions in their exploration of death, identity and discourse, they nonetheless arrive in a similar philosophical location with regard to identity and the (in)stability of ‘self’ in language. That conclusion is summed in IM’s recognition that the transcendent, spiritually experienced ‘Self’ is finally built out of the pleasure and aesthetic rewards to be found in relentless change, necessary improvisation, and the inevitable fact of the present passing thus infinite opportunity of now, “one night, way early in the mornin,’ I looks up and sees the stars and I starts singin.’ I don’t know what it was, some kinda church song, I guess. All I know is I *ends up* singin’ the blues. I sings me some blues that night ain’t never been sang before, and while I’m singin’ them blues I makes up my mind that I ain’t nobody but myself” (66). Here is an example of black masculinity on the move, a refugee identity traveling between available linguistic definitions -- between the contradiction of categories that stand against one another.³⁴ We can see this movement, situating, or positioning in IM’s description of himself in time, he names himself as finding a voice, “one night, way early in the mornin,” a contradiction that experientially occurs in the twilight between definitive states of Being (66). The shifting state of (un)certainly revealed in IM’s string of introspections on his diathesis, “I don’t know...I guess...All I know” indicates the acatalepsy of black masculine identity, as well as the border of

a lesson in how to die. I don’t mean just the death at teh end of this life, but all of the falling apart that happens continually. The fear of death -- which is also the fear of insecurity, of not having it all together -- seems to be the most fundamental phenomenon we have to work with because death is an ending, and endings happen all the time. Things are always ending and arising and ending. But we are strangely conditioned to want to experience just the birth part and not the death part,” *Living With Dying*, eds. Joan Berzoff & Phyllis R. Silverman, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

³⁴ Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil : a Study of Afro-American Narrative*, Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1991.

instability, as the not knowing, the guessing, and the delimited knowing are all expressed by an 'I' capable of finally singing spontaneously (66). That the Blues are the protagonist's vehicle for self-expression is not surprising given the temporal flexibility of the genre and consequent capacity to facilitate black masculinity as an identity on the move. "Some kinda church song," as the conveyance of black masculinity in this scene gestures toward the tradition of African American Christianity as a discursive location of refuge, as well as the site of discontent, limitation and confinement that must be perpetually revised and moved beyond.

Alongside a reading of this passage as Ellison's assertion that one "end's up," finally, with an identity improvised in language is the possibility of a transcendent Being that coheres across discourse and coalesces in sensory perceptions of the 'Self' within audition, tactile sensation, and vocalization of death-song, or the blues. This moment in *Invisible Man* imagines an alternative dimension, one in which human beings might discern 'Self' as both natural and social with little limitation to the possibilities for those who dwell within the mindful presentism of sensory experience. This present appears as a dimension of expressive contradiction, one in which a basic present-tense sense of 'Self' provides a metaphysical alternative to social prescriptions of black masculinity, hence approaching a synthetic stasis between the antinodal points of living-death and the death-bound life diagnosed in the epigraphs opening this chapter. Ellison's protagonist "end's up" proclaiming from his symbolic grave and underground lair, "I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of this form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility" (7). Though IM's claim to having "become alive" is past tense, dubious, and demonstrative of

some denial -- he is, afterall, a sequentially unreliable interpreter of the discourse he inhabits, mis-recognizing the nature of his 'becoming' at each narrative turn -- this declaration of novel existence at the point of disappearance from social life is worth careful consideration. Why would it be that IM's 'passing' through the membrane of community life into an afterworld of social death registers him as more 'alive' than ever before? Ellison here suggests that there is no cure in language for a living-death, or zombie diagnosis, that the therapy, albeit not a curative one, is in coming to a place of acknowledgment or realization that the present-tense unprescribed form of the Self is the route of escape for black men hostage to the identity malforming idiolects of white supremacist America.

While Ellison and Johnson both experiment with rehabilitative language as the cure to the lethality of black masculinity in U.S. society, both authors also thematize the social failures of language to offer respite to sufferers. In the aftermath of expulsion, the exiled school-boy IM manages to secure employment laboring in the basement boiler room of Liberty Paints, a plant whose motto is 'If It's Optic White, It's the Right White' with a "screaming eagle" for trademark (218, 198). His first day on the job goes radically awry when, after a physical altercation with his supervisor Lucius Brockay, an aged anti-union black man with prehistoric tenure as the head of Liberty Paint's three-floor underground furnace room, a momentary lapse in maintenance on the high-pressure valves leads to an explosion and near-death accident for IM. His descent into the nether regions of the plant is allegorical; in the high-pressure vault behind a door marked 'Danger' is the ancient, variegated equipment amalgamating the base for all paint eventually refined and pigmented in the higher levels of the plant. The equipment is

feminine: “set to cook down” the mysterious ingredients, “she” emits a “dying hum” then “low “roar,” “angry hum,” “rattle,” then “low roaring,” all unintelligible noise that perturbs IM (214). The anti-engineer Brockway inquires if IM understands what is going on, to which he replies, “No Sir” (214).”Well that’s going to be the guts, what they call the *vee*-hicle of the paint. Least it will be by the time I git through putting other stuff with it,” answers Brockway. Confused, IM asks, “But I thought the paint was made upstairs...,” but Brockway informs him that, “they just mixes int eh color, make it look pretty. Right down here is where the real paint is made...An’ not only do I make up the base, I fixes the varnishes and lots of the oils too”(214). Liberty Paint plant is an allegory on the manufacture of ‘racial’ identity in the U.S., the “*vee*-hicle” for pigmented paint, or ‘racial identity is language. The linguistic substrate for “mixing” color is “cooked” in the historical subconscious of culture, and gives rise to the identities operative in the social life of supra-registers. The base is not white to begin with, but must be made that way by the counter-intuitive presence of black pigment added on the ground floor before being processed in the “testing lab” above (199). Though IM cannot access this allegorical meaning nor its implications because of his “short-circuit” cognition and zombie condition, he struggles to understand and follow his instructions: “you just do what you’re told and don’t try to think about it,” says the plant manager when IM demonstrates his ability to administer the correct number of black paint drops into each “government” ordered bucket of ‘Optic White’ paint (200). He does attempt to reason about it, however, and in rebuke is sent downstairs to the pressure vessel below to labor at a point in the production process that is prior to reasoning and thought. And while the basic vehicle for identity is language manufactured in the haphazardly constructed boiler-room of

prehistory, the varnishes and oils eventually laminate and smooth over the wounds that lay beneath, creating a transparent finish that cures, leaving brown woods with a translucent stain. However, all of these substances are also highly combustible catalysts. When the language pressure-cooker blows, IM is knocked unconscious, institutionalized in the plant hospital, subjected to eugenicist scientific experimentation, electroshocked, lobotomized, and then released. Lucius is a devil zombie figure who attempts to kill IM after suspecting him of union participation -- he attacks and bites IM before escaping just prior to the furnace explosion. After the IM's near fatal industrial accident occasioned by the occupational hazard of working while black, he is treated by physicians who dispute the appropriate course of treatment for his zombie-like presentation. The surgeon shares his doubts with the psychiatrist that language can resolve the situation suffered by IM, saying, "I don't know, but I believe it a mistake to assume that solutions -- cures, that is -- that apply in, uh primitive instance, are, uh equally effective when more advanced conditions are in question. Suppose it were a New Englander with a Harvard background?" (235-6) The physicians concur and a surgical intervention is offered, a pre-frontal lobotomy. Surgical intervention, the excision and partitioning of cortical material connecting and integrating the IM's sense of Self does not cure him of the morbid diagnosis of living death. Instead, IM enters into a new identity that is yet another version, albeit a medically modified one, of the same terminal status diagnosed by the Vet in the opening of the narrative.

The torture IM experiences in the plant-hospital strips him of his received identity, he loses the name of his mother, cannot recall his own, and finally is discharged in a state of aphasiac confusion. The discharging "scientist" tells IM, "well, my boy,

you're cured. We are going to release you," (246). Befuddled and disoriented, IM signs an affidavit absolving Liberty Paints of responsibility for the industrial accident. Saying goodbye to the doctor/death-manager, IM twice describes the experience of torture in linguistic terms, announcing that "It's been quite pleasant, our little palaver," and shortly after, "and now our palaver is finished" (248, 249). The term palaver is used to reference the parabolic speech patterns that ensued in negotiations between imperialist explorers and indigenous people in Africa; a palaver was that discursive performance of power and identity improvised in the prolonged and apparently meaningless idle of casual conversation, ripe with feigned respect and strategic measure of the other's capabilities. "Things whirled too fast around me. My mind went alternately bright and blank in slow rolling waves. We, he, him --my mind and I -- were no longer getting around in the same circles. Nor my body either," the narrator shares at the close of the Liberty Pain chapter (249-250). IM has been neither cured, nor killed by the encounter. He is turned out, "released," into social life as a zombie yet, albeit in a permanently altered iteration of his original state of living-death.

Ellison's IM experiences multiple revisions in Self motivated by the pain of trauma and historical violence inflicted on black 'racial identity,' and similarly to the protagonist of *Oxherding Tale*, IM struggles to find a linguistic patrimony that escapes a morbid diagnosis. After the catastrophic victimization and medical abuse suffered at Liberty Paints, IM is discovered as a rhetorician of black working-class folk sensibility by Brother Jack, leader of the fictionalized Communist Party in the City. In the crescendo of IM's activism and identification for the Brotherhood, he witnesses his friend Todd Clifton be murdered by the NYC police. The funeral is a potential turning point in IM's

terminal disease course, the death-ritual simmers with possible sanatory effects; IM begins to develop a therapeutic language in the course of the epitaphios, or funeral oration, announcing to the audience of mourners: “Todd Clifton’s one with the ages. But what’s that to do with you in this heat under this veiled sun? Now he’s part of history, and he has received his true life” from the death-bound subjectivity created in the language of white supremacist America (458).³⁵ “Didn’t they scribble his name on a standardized pad? His Race: colored! Religion: unknown...Place of birth: U.S....Next of kin: unknown...Cause of death (be specific): resisting reality” IM euologizes (458). The cause of death (CoD) given by IM is the diagnosis of too much ego, Clifton was suffered the terminal condition of being a black man desirous of liberated life, a lethally unrealistic aspiration. Invisible Man’s eulogy for Tod Clifton demonstrates an improvisational aesthetic that temporarily remits the diagnosis of zombiehood for IM, while simultaneously naming the limits of language as a solution to the diagnosis of living as a death-bound subject, for a black man like the murdered Clifton who had died from a sense of ‘Self’ and attachment to ‘racial’ identity. When Invisible Man begins his enraged exhortation to the mourners on behalf of his fallen brother, he admonishes:

Go home, he’s as dead as he’ll ever die. That’s the end in the beginning and there’s no encore. There’ll be no miracles and there’s no one to preach a sermon...His name was Tod Clifton and he was young and he was a leader...So he died; and we who love him are gathered here to mourn him. It’s as simple as that and as short as that. His name was Clifton and he was black and they shot him. Isn’t that enough to tell? Isn’t it all you need to know? Isn’t that enough to appease your thirst for drama and send you home to sleep it off? Go take a drink and forget it...His name was Clifton and they shot him, and I was there to see him fall...The story’s too short and too simple. His name was Tod Clifton, Tod

³⁵For readings of funeral oration and definition of the idea in other literary contexts see, Robert F. Weir, ed., *Death in Literature*, New York : Columbia University Press, 1980; Derek Hughes, *Culture and Sacrifice : Ritual Death in Literature and Opera*, Cambridge, UK ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2007; Jolene Zigarovich, *Writing Death and Absence in the Victorian Novel : Engraved Narratives*, New York, NY : Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Clifton, he was unarmed and his death was as senseless as his life was futile (454-7).

According to Brother Jack, who tells IM at one point that he is not like the other black working-class tenants of the building in New York, recovery from living death is accomplished by 'shedding' the dis-ease of 'racial' identity. When IM objects, Brother Jack says, "Oh no brother you are mistaken. Perhaps you were, but you're not any longer. You have not completely shed that self, that old agrarian self, but it's dead and you will throw it off completely and emerge something new" (291). In this quote we see that the theme of ego dissolution and rebirth is premised on that transitional death of the 'Self' concurrent with the acquisition of a new discursive frame of reference. Later in the plot, Ellison reveals the discourse of the Brotherhood to be one that is terminal for black men too, an unlivable language of resistance for Clifton whose martyrdom is the moment of recognition by the IM. The protagonist of *Invisible Man* ends-up burrowing underneath the inheritance of language, he refuses to construct a 'Self' inside the house of religious, spiritual or philosophical forefathers whose discourse he styles in successive display but determines insufficient to sustain dignity for anyone identified as a black man. Whereas the morbid diagnosis in *Oxherding Tale* is resolved by way of the protagonist's successful flight from his family of origin, and then final reconciliation with his dead father George, apart from cursory references to reticent parents who silence his grandfather's deathbed invective, the family/ancestors of IM do not appear in the novel. IM is introduced to characters that fill the paternal void, and who act of models for identification, purveyors of a certain kind of wisdom, and ancestors of a sort that offer IM a cultural and 'racial' history. Ellison's protagonist doesn't pursue patrimony, or familial reconciliation in the urgency of identity formation. Not until after he is awakened from

sleep in the bedroom of the middle-aged white wife of Brother George, one of the fictionalized Communist Party members by a phone call alerting him to the racially instigated rioting, violence that culminates in IM's decision to sequester himself from social life, does Ellison initiate IM's reflection on the intersection of death, remembrance and identity.

Desire for vengeance after receipt of a racially motivated piece of passive aggressive hate-mail warns IM from becoming too loud within the party drives IM to consider accepting the advances of a senior comrades overly interested wife, Sybil. Sybil's interest in IM is puerile, informed by internalized misogyny, belief in the myth of the 'black-rapist' and her masochistic fantasy of victimhood. The scene finds IM extricating himself from Sybil's demand that he perform 'black rapist' for her pleasure; he is simultaneously filled with sympathy for her disturbingly pathetic longing and revulsion for the politically reprehensible implications of her fantasy. Sybil passes out from drinking too much liquor and reawakens with the fallacious news that she has been sexually assaulted. Unsatisfied, she elaborates a plan for recurrent performances by IM and refuses to allow him leave from the horrific encounter. When a phone call comes with notice of race riots instigated by the Brotherhood for strategic leverage in the political contest between communist movement and hegemonic authority in the City, IM rallies Sybil outside and only then manages to cleave her from him by placing her in a cab and boarding a bus uptown. IM looks out the window and finds:

The cool sea smell came through to me, constant and thick in the swiftly unfolding blur of anchored boats, dark water and lights pouring past. Across the river was Jersey and I remembered my entry into Harlem. Long past. I thought, long past. It was as if drowned in the river. To my right and ahead the church spire towered high, crowned with a red light of warning. And now we were passing the hero's tomb and I recalled a visit there. You went up the steps and

inside and you looked far below to find him, at rest, draped flags...One Hundred and twenty-fifth street came quickly...I faced the water. There was a light breeze, but now with the motion gone the heat returned, clinging. Far ahead in the dark I saw the monumental bridge, ropes of lights across the dark river... 'The Time Is Now...' the sign across the river began, but with history stomping upon me with hobnailed boots, I thought with a laugh, why worry about time? (532-33)

Vestigial remembrance of the trans-Atlantic slave trade emerges in this passage, Ellison's rendition intergenerational post-traumatic memory the middle-passage is triggered by the sexual exploitation of Sybil's predation. IM's unconscious juxtaposition of disenfranchised grief associated with victims of that "long past" drowning and the socially validated bereavement of the "hero" whose tomb is "draped in flags" under the sanctifying presence of "church spires" is revelatory of Ellison's premise that the conditions of one's death are indicative of the conditions of one's life. Bodies honored with dignified death ritual under the protective claim of Church and State are distinguished from bodies disqualified from respectful remembrance by historical denial. "I saw the monumental bridge, ropes of lights across the dark river," shares IM, his observance of history's promise like that arch of enlightened hope over the waters of death, yet the pain of that past "entry" into an identity constructed under the "sign" of the present, voided of family, ancestors, or descendents, an identity that is denied recognition even in death, or especially in death, breaks his psychological composure (532-533).

Concern with history abates in the wake of post-traumatic flashback, and like those old black tenement residents IM defends from eviction earlier in the novel, like those "very old...already dead" because "history ha[d] passed them by," IM renounces concern with the Brotherhood's project of "rising to the necessity of the historical situation" -- the overwhelmingly lethal psychological orientation from the perspective of the Brotherhood (291). IM's insight that the absence of liberty in contemporary black life

is inherently tied to the denial of dignity in black death, as demonstrated in the contradiction between an unknown white man receiving a consecrated “hero’s tomb” decorated with symbols of national honor, and the complete deficiency of memorial to victims of passage “across the dark water,” is triggered by the coercive sexual encounter with Sybil (533). The flashback disabuses IM of all faith in history as antidote from living death. IM’s mad urge to laugh at the idea of time as meaningful to zombies who by definition can only live in the “now,” recalls earlier argument with Brother Jack over the nature of recovery from the living-death suffered by black folks indifferent to the historiographical predicament of political life. Earlier in the narrative, prior to receipt of the undermining hate-mail, chagrined at Brother Jack’s declaration that the working-class religiosity of African American tenants signifies their status as “already dead, defunct,” IM retorts, “I like them...they’re folks just like me,” to which Jack replies, “perhaps you were, but that’s all past, dead. You might not recognize it now, but that part of you is dead!...*History* has been born in your brain”(291). However, *history* is not the therapeutic antidote for zombiehood that IM’s hopes; instead the narrator’s experience of “history stomping...with hobnailed boots” while in the midst of middle-passage flashback confirms to IM the futility of the past as a cure -- it is, in fact, a curse. Inheritance of discourse from a cursed history of racial violence informs the coercive sexual encounter between Sybil and IM -- his devolving identity in the aftermath of catastrophic psychological violence inflicted by Sybil is a coping strategy used to manage disenfranchised grief, anger and loss (553).

When IM rejects Sybil’s intention to have him play the ‘black rapist,’ a role that need not involve coercion but only contact between a white woman and black man in the

mythology of U.S. racial violence, Ellison erodes the eroticism of encounter by foregrounding the awkward, exploitative and aesthetically repulsive enactment of this tired cliché. Yet, IM's inability to foresee and prevent rehearsal of even the most fundamental stereotype of interracial relationships sends the protagonist spinning out of control, which eventually leads him to his resting place, the symbolic (anti)grave. The scene with Sybil finds IM fulfilling almost all expectations placed upon him and trying to negotiate these disparate expectations, only to lead to his descent into the nether regions of social life. The cycles of crisis that unfold during the course of IM's narrative coalesce into a pointed moment of clarity when IM identifies the encounter with Sybil as opportunity for zombie re-enactment of racist mythos, as well as exigency for death-bound decision: the unpalatable juncture compels him toward social death. IM's descent to the underworld, or symbolic death, is the option that allows for some preservation of dignity and therefore identity, though the identity is socially disarticulated and invisible, it is nonetheless preferable for IM to depend entirely sensory recognition of the self beyond the living-death of zombie identity than pursue the death-bound identification of becoming Sybil's dehumanized sexual object.

Diagnosis and Gender Identity

Johnson's diagnostician is a veterinarian by training, employed on the plantation Leviathan to treat enslaved hostages, though his primary responsibility is assigning cause of death. The archetype of the medical doctor in African American literature is a figure whose moral character is called into question by the place of the physician as slavery-system-bureaucrat, Jim Crow healthcare-denier, and post Civil Rights movement medical apartheid proponent. Of course, the character of 'the doctor' often serves as the

lightening rod for indictments of dichotomous diagnostics that depend on 'race.' The question of the doctor's character, and the character of the doctor, is signified on by both Ellison and Johnson in their respective diagnoses of black mortality.

The onset of morbid symptomatology is concurrent with Andrew's introduction to the diagnosis itself; diagnosis is prognosis, history is prophecy and description is prescription in Andrew's encounter with the Vet. The young aspirant to a free life shares with the reader, "My heart pounded, for an instant, like the hoofbeats of a horse; I bit down so hard on my tongue it bled for hours," after initially hearing from the Vet" (56). The diagnosis of vanity here is not describing a misattribution of attraction, nor the belief in one's superior appearance, but the vanity of effort when black men attempt to live with intact identity, or to die with dignity. All struggle to establish a livable identity, to build a 'Self' through mutual recognition, to imagine a consolidated ego with potential of posthumous transcendence in community memory is an *effort in vain*. The vanity of Andrew's struggle leaves him death-bound, he learns that there is no livable space where the strain of understanding will not short-circuit his senses. Even after 'passing' from black identity, the culmative consequence of racial violence on Andrew's health is measured as devastating by his white father-in-law Dr. Undercliff, also a physician. After examination, he tells Andrew,

You, my young friend, I mean you, William Harris, *you*, sir are suffering from a few minor physical complaints, not one of which is fatal, but taken all together, and if not watched closely...will lead to the medical equivalent of the Panic of 1837; you have for a lad of two and twenty, the constitutional makeup of a...very old matador, or perhaps his bull, an adrenal output suited for the Cro-Magnon Era...I do not recommend rest; I demand it. (120)

The emphasis on 'you' in this diagnosis foregrounds that racial death and passing has not saved Andrew/William's life. His prognosis is still terminal, the strain too much,

however, he is allowed a death with dignity as a white William, he is acknowledged as having a socially valued identity -- the physician demands he recover, rather than awaiting his death in order to commodify his corpse. As a white William, Andrew is capable of being a 'you,' of being an 'I' intelligible as human in this intersubjective circuit of recognition between doctor and patient, as well as before medical science entire. The narrative closes with the 'passed' Andrew (William) still a *revenant*, an undead wanderer, returned from the 'racial' grave after Reconstruction on a mission of "rebuilding...the world" (176). The diagnosis rendered by the Vet, the morbid affliction of futile ego forces the death-bound Andrew to commit 'racial' suicide, he passes into whiteness as the white, married middle-class father William to avoid oblivion. The story's closing leaves the possibility open of Andrew's return, we are told that, "after the war, Fruity [wife] and I turned to the business of rebuilding, with our daughter Anna (all is conserved; all), the world," implying that the prior 'self' is sustained and reanimable in some form. If all is conserved, as is the memory of Andrew's white mother (Cripplegate Plantation mistress Anna Polkinghorne), in her namesake's identity, then the work of remaking the world may include the creation of a space for Andrew's re-emergence.

Thematic in *Invisible Man* and *Oxherding Tale* is the philosophical point that birth, life, death and rebirth are the outcome of sexual relationships mired in the contingencies of 'racial' power relations. Black masculinity in both narratives arises, rehearses and dissolves in the language of social relationships wherein dignity is continuously compromised, and anchors of identity in discourse confound the potential of a validated and legitimate 'self.' The death-bound protagonist Andrew's birth on the South Carolinian plantation Cripplegate is the consequence of master and slave having

one too many drinks and wife-swapping for a night, with catastrophic implications for the maintenance of Southern 'racial' etiquette. Johnson's neo-slave narrative begins with the protagonists disclosure of the "unrecorded accident" wherein Master Jonathan and Butler George strike a deal of exchange that leaves Andrew's mother the white mistress Anna, "like a dead man demanding justice," (8), his father George pays the "wage of false pride" (7) when sent to the fields where he decides he had been a traitor to the Race and begins a "world-historical mission" to ridicule slavers, step-mother Mattie never forgives George, and Jonathan is left an exile from his marriage bed. Mattie, "never forgave George, who never forgave Jonathan, who blamed Anna for letting things go too far, and *she* demanded a divorce but settled, finally, on living in a separate wing of the house" (7). Twenty years later Andrew receives a death-sentence from Jonathan when he asks for early manumission in order to marry his adolescent beloved, a slave-girl Minty. Jonathan tells him, "All our bondsmen will be released after Anna dn I close our eyes. This is in our will. You haven't long, I suppose, to wait" and though Jonathan, "hated all discussions of death, especially his own," (17) he decides to sign an execution order written in "cramped, arthritic script that made his letter resemble a cross between cuneiform, Arabic, and Morse code," for Andrew to take with him. Like the letters the Invisible Man carries from the school founder Bledsoe that instruct the receiver to "hope him to death, and keep him running" (*IM*, 194), the letter that Andrew bears is a "tortured message" that Jonathan promises will "get work with one of my old acquaintances" (19). Andrew naïvely rushes to share the news of what he believes is a happy deal with Jonathan to buy his and Minty's life by working of the sum with a friend of Jonathan's with his father George. His father grimly replies, "Hawk...I don't 'spect to see you again

‘til Judgement Day” (20). George then tells a strange story of the 40-year-old white mistress of Leviathan Flo Hatfield’s sexual cannibalism: she “picked a slave, preferably male, from her fields. Him she bathed, rested, then washed in cassia and tamarind, massaged with castor oil...No other servants were permitted near the house. For days, whole weeks...eventually a black Maria eased in from town, and a veterinarian examined the body. Then a mortician dragged a pine casket down her front steps, hauled it away, and her bondsman was listed among slaved who’d fled to Canada” (20). Eventually Andrew finds himself standing at the graveside of his predecessor at Leviathan, listening to the musings of the Vet, a failed physician and former abortionist, “I see *so* much of this in my work...It’s an idea I’ve been working on for some time...Some strapping, able-bodied young man strong as a bull decides there’s no future for *him*, and keels over” (57). Andrew is comforted by the Vet, “at least he was spared the mines, eh?” and encouraged to jettison the morbid belief in personal identity that motivated his request for manumission in the first place.

The final accomplishment of Andrew Hawkins, the protagonist of Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale*, is not only escape from enslavement and its nefarious health consequences, but escape from the bind of the death-bound life predicted by the Vet for black men with the desire to imagine a Self. Over the course of the novel, Andrew develops an emancipatory frame of reference in response to his insight that possession of an ego is a terminal condition as a black man living in a language that forecasts black masculinity as a morbid condition. His solution is to form a vision of personal and ‘racial’ history that is malleable, dynamic, and non-linear, yet coherent -- a “tapestry” of intergenerational life that survives the morbid condition of ‘racial’ enslavement, thus

avoiding the terminal prognosis (175). It is through his 'racial' passing from black to white that Andrew manages a radical revision of identity, thus Andrew ironically is capable of reuniting metaphysically with his beloved father, a man whose death-bound identity was shaped by the language of a 'racial' Self. Even as Andre extricates himself from the death-bound identity and the language of his father George's failed efforts to survive with an ego as a black man, he nonetheless experiences another type of death in 'passing.' Though Johnson's tale runs with the diagnosis of excess ego, at the same time the trajectory of the narrative culminates in the formation of an ego that requires Andrew's 'racial death' through passing into a married, white home-owning Self. *Oxherding Tale* invokes both explicit as well as implicit models of white patrimony to explore the diagnosis of death by over-identification with the concept of 'Self' suffered by black men under 'racial' enslavement in the novel. Oedipal power relations and the navigation of white patrimony as the only course of conceivable escape occur as central problems for Andrew's ability to develop and recover from the diagnosis and escape from the morbid diagnosis.

In *Oxherding Tale*, the historical event of U.S. slavery operates as a metaphor for African American morbidity created by the conditions of enslavement in language, and the consequent psychological, physiological and physical outcomes experienced in bondage. The plot-line of *Oxherding Tale* tracks the lines of conventional neo/slave narrative, moving from antebellum enslavement communicated to an audience in first person narration, to the eventual life-sustaining transcendence of bondage accomplished through flight from the site of family, home, and former Self.³⁶ The generic conventions

³⁶ Ashraf Rushdy, ed., *Neo-Slave Narratives: The Social Logic of a Literary Form*, London: Oxford University Press, 1999.

of the antebellum slave narrative, moving from birth through life, in 'racial' death and the formation of a non-terminal identity confirmed through marital status and property ownership, Johnson's strategic re-appropriation of the form works to address both historical convention and postmodern readings of the past.³⁷ History, as revisited through Johnson's novel, is already and conspicuously infused with the prejudices and preoccupations of the postmodern 'Self.' For example, the reader is encouraged by the narrator who periodically slips into late twentieth-century vernacular, to read the historical plots of black cultural nationalism and second-wave feminism as pretexts to an allegory situated in the nineteenth century. Consider the self-identified ante-feminist Flo Hatfield, described as "so liberated from convention that no one in Abbeville would touch her with a barge pole" (44-5), or again, the black nationalist George Hawkins who protests against engaging in mundane chores, arguing that "this was no work [...] for one of the avant-garde of the African Revolution" (22). In this fashion, Johnson exemplifies the postmodernist claim that the past is simultaneously an inescapable inheritance -- for Johnson insists, "all is conserved; all" (176) and an irretrievable enigma that must not be romanticized into static form, for the characters that cling to static conceptions of self and society become the novel's most tragic victims of the morbid diagnosis; the illusion of identity.

Andrew's escape from the death-sentence of attachment to Self, with the associated pride, dignity, desire for life that comes with a consolidated ego, is accomplished by another form of death: 'passing' as a white man, marrying a white woman, entering into the identity of a bourgeois home-owner and politically recognized

³⁷Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

citizen in white supremacist society.³⁸ This transition between a death-bound life and a 'racial' death is problematic in *Oxherding Tale* for several reasons, only one of which is the suggestion that women are both a tool that enables the consolidation of a new livable ego while also causative of death-by ego. The investment in patriarchal inheritance, and in the power of white patrimony that culminates in Andrew's 'passing' is complicated by Johnson's ironic self-aware winking at the ways that this discourse harbors its own self-destruction. The diagnosis of 'zombie' is not far off from the life that Andrew builds by 'passing' -- and the dependency on hegemonic gender dynamics for the ultimate stability of his new 'Self' is fraught with the problematics identified by Ellison's Vet in the diagnosis of ego-deficiency for both Andrew and his white wife Peggy.

Toward the end of the tale, Andrew/William purchases his ex-fiance, the enslaved Minty, and brings her into his marital home with the hope that medical treatment will save her -- she has experienced brutalization after the failed slave rebellion at the plantation Cripple Gate. Andrew's fantasy of an interracial triadic relationship between himself, wife Peggy, and former lover Minty appears to endorse critique and compromise the desirability of socially-sanctified marriage between white man and white woman. Minty's inexplicable death after being seen behind-closed-doors by Dr. Undercliff, Andrew's father-in-law, brings that fantasy to an abrupt end. The sanctity and legitimacy of white matrimony allows Andrew's 'self' to become livable in language, yet the development of his patriarchal 'self' freed from the problematics of 'race' and identified with a universal humanism is riddled with skepticism by Johnson's authorial treatment. Andrew/William's marriage parodies the dynamics of strife between in-laws and spouses,

³⁸ See Thomas Foster, 'The Sexual Abuse of Black Men Under Slavery,' *A. Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Sep 01, 2011; Vol. 20, No. 3, p. 445-464, for a fuller discussion of this dynamic.

between husbands and wives when past ‘lives’ are buried, between householders and the world when social recognition depends on affected solidarity between ‘man and wife.’ The movement of Andrew’s ‘self,’ from enslaved African American to refugee, from white householder to post-Reconstruction racial revenant, contradicts the death-wish imparted from father to son, as well as Andrew’s determination to be attain a free life consistent with his own heart’s desires professed in the opening of the tale. Contrary to the tragic literary conventions of the ‘passing’ novel, *Oxherding Tale*’s narrative triumph coincides with Andrew’s survival upon successful passing into the white world, a seeming celebrate of the ‘racial’ afterlife.³⁹ Although passing, as reconfigured by Johnson, ceases to be a morbid transgression, it remains incomplete as a curative strategy. In passing, Andrew attempts to forget not only the chronic pain of death-bound subjectivity, but also his father. Andrew’s passing thus tacitly accepts the discursive terms of life and death dictated by the racial logic of U.S. slavery, rendering him a ‘zombie’ like the protagonist of *Invisible Man*.

Death and Reconciliation

Systematic destruction of African American family networks and ancestral kinship systems during slavery facilitated control and dehumanization. Naturally, enslaved men and women objected to and fought against practices that deprived them of names, locations, bodies and personal effects of the dead so as to have the capacity to reinstate the identity of the decedent to the community through culturally appropriate death ritual. Conciliation of the bereaved, and reconciliation of the ‘family’ through death-ritual is a primordial goal in *Oxherding Tale*. Dispossessing one of their dead is a

³⁹ Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line : Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

difficult thing, as the identity of the decedent is beyond reach of enslavers; thus ideological efforts at obliteration of posthumous identity survival, along with intergenerational transmission of intergenerational cultural/intellectual cultural resources is a process dependent on interruption of patrimony, inheritance, and death-ritual. Andrew reflects, "Predictably, we fought this massive assault on the ego, even inverted the values of whites (or men) -- anything to avoid self -obliteration" (76). Yet, avoidance of 'self' destruction is the very clinging to dis-ease that culminates in the diagnosis of death-by-ego. Andrew's father George struggles to recover from zombiehood, from his conviction that "he had been a traitor" to his 'race' during his service as a butler to his master (7). Johnson's use of treason as a psychological posture and social behavior of black masculinity resonates with the deathbed confession of the IM's grandfather, but whereas IM's grandfather had posited treachery as a viable strategy of survival in the seam between living-death and the death-bound life, George disavows his former allegiance to Master Jonathan and regards his treason as shameful. George recovers from his zombiehood by staging a failed insurrection on the plantation Cripple Gate, after which he is executed by the character Death, a slave catcher named Horace Banon who goes by the name Soulcatcher. The Soulcatcher shows George's son Andrew the inked memorial to George that lives on his macabre tattoo memorial of murdered slaves he'd caught or executed over the years. The tattoo cemetery offers George's memory a residence, and Andrew honors George's death-wish delivered at Andrew's 'Homeleaving,' the day Andrew is shipped to Leviathan to be murdered in sexual slavery by Flo Hatefield. George and Andrew confer in the context of Andrew's death-sentence about the bind of

black masculinity and his preference that his son die of the diagnosis of consolidated ego rather than egolessness:

“‘You could pass...if you wanted to. But if you did, it’d be like turnin’ your back on me and everthin’ I believes in.’

‘I’d never do that.’

‘Don’t...Whatever you do, Hawk -- it pushes the Race forward, or us back. You know what I’ve always told you: If you fail, everything we been fightin’ for fails with you. be y’self.’

‘I will...I promise’ (21).

Later in the narrative when Andrew learns of his father’s role in uprising, and subsequent execution, he feels himself on the verge of coronary arrest and so goes to see the Vet for medical care. The Vet examines him and finds that Andrew’s heart had “developed...a sort of whisper, or moan on the diastolic downbeat” (69). The Vet advises Andrew that he knows some curative therapeutic interventions, however, Andrew’s heart will never rest unless Andrew stops “being a Negro,” a state of being for which “internal medicine can’t help” (69). Andrew is so despondent over the news that his betrothed Minty might have been sold and that his father George has been murdered that he finds himself in a state of intolerable stress, chronic hyper-tension, unbearable systemic strain. The curative interventions offered by the Vet include a menu of ‘lies’ sold for between \$100 and \$5 that offer some ‘life-assurance,’ including ego-consolidating fictions such foregrounding the import of individual belief in not only Self, but a posthumous continuity of Self. The menu reads:

(1) The faith that someday you would be honored by your community for your contributions \$100 (2) That, if not honored, your children would one day regard you as a source of inspiration, \$75 (3) If neither of the above, you would enjoy the benefits of a good marriage, a little property, and pride in your work, \$50 (4) If none of these, then you would enjoy all of the above, plus life-everlasting, in the afterworld, \$25 (5) If none of the above, you would, at least, die mercifully in your sleep \$5. (71)

Andrew is filled with rage and horror, and thinks to himself that the “no-win struggle for happiness in the Black world” is a futile and grotesquely ridiculous pursuit, his father’s death a meaningless sacrifice inasmuch as living with an ego, with life-assurance, is a valueless fiction that neither protects from the morbid diagnosis nor guarantees death with dignity. George’s son can’t afford life-assurance as Flo Hatfield hasn’t paid him for his sexual labor, so, still clinging to the vain conceit of self-possession, Andrew confronts Flo about his back-wages upon his return to the Leviathan big house, a confrontation that ends with Flo’s nose broken and Andrew’s death sentence for striking her during the act of coerced sexual intimacy. High on opium, drunk on wine, bereaved at his father’s murder and the loss of his betrothed to traders in the wake of their extinguished uprising at Cripple Gate, desperate to buy life-assurance and demanding his back-wages, Andrew’s ego breaks as does Flo’s nose when he strikes her face in his effort to escape the dehumanizing misrecognition of Flo’s sexual attention in this moment of profound ego-induced peril to his Self. Father dead, chance of sexual sovereignty gone, exiled from home, without refuge, Andrew’s sense of a consolidated Self ruptures and he acquiesces to the curative ‘racial’ death prescribed by the Vet and indicated by his own reasoning

that life as a black man was a “slaughterhouse -- a style of being characterized by stasis, denial, humiliation, thinghood, and as the philosophers said, ‘relative being’” -- Andrew accepts the necessity that he suffer ‘racial’ death in order survive. In response to Andrew’s question, “Is there *nothing* I can do to control my heart?” the Vet answers, “If you had life-assurance, your heart might return to normal” (70). This line of logic recalls Andrew’s previous death-bound subjectivity in confronting Master Jonanthan to demand manumission on the basis of his literacy. Ironically, in the opening of the narrative Andrew is self-possessed, consolidated in ego and therefore death-bound instead of bound for life. He tells his master that his private tutor had “taught me to read...taught me to control my own heart,” tragically, it is this same ego that once injured begins to kill Andrew with the never-resting search for control once his life-assurance is lost (18).

George’s recovery from zombiehood and assumption of a consolidated ego happens in his incessantly returning to the coerced scene of the mythic ‘black rapist,’ and his son’s conception -- the scene of the slave in the master’s bedroom and sexual encounter with a white woman. It is in the fantasy of the retributive return to this moment that George cultivates his death-bound ego and new racial politics. Underlying his vigorous commitment to the “world-historical mission of Africa” (21) is George’s wounded and vengeful conviction that “you gonna feel daid [...] until you back in the Big House and Master Polkinghorne is down heah -- permanently” (105). This strategy of reactive identification and attempted ego-consolidation, however, proves to be the cause of his death, affirming the Vet’s diagnosis. Andrew contemplates his father’s efforts to establish a livable identity thusly:

My father kept the pain alive. He needed to rekindle the racial horrors, revive old pains, review disappointments like a sick man fingering his sores. . . Grief was the grillwork -- the emotional grid -- through which George Hawkins sifted and sorted events, simplified a world so overrich in sense it outstripped him (142).

As represented by Andrew, George's racial identity is indeed the morbid diagnosis, invariably constituted as vengeful reaction, as a moralized response to social disempowerment. His ego formation, moreover, is inherently linked to the rehearsal of a traumatic inheritance, the history of black men as sexually exploited zombies, imagined and real perpetrators, or death-bound agents of their own sexual expression. Grief, Andrew tells us, mediates George's relation to the world, as pain becomes a necessary precondition for a legible enactment of black identity or Self. George's assertion that black men will feel "daid" until allowed space for the consolidation of an ego through expression of sexual identity is also revelatory of a misconception that sexual access to white women is antidote for zombiehood. George's misguided formula for recovery from zombiehood foregrounds the bind of the death-bound subject; when faced with attachment to the Self as evidenced by sexual intimacy with white women, the identity is also inevitably tied to trauma and a history of morbid racial violence.

Andrew's diagnosis by the 'Vet' is that of "no life *assurance*," a cause of death the Vet invents for enslaved black men (57). The Vet is a figure with "vile habits," a former abortionist, a failed physician, and a seller of "bogus funeral policies to slow-witted slaves in Leviathan's quarters, giggled too much for a man of science"(57). Black men with consolidated egos like Andrew, when enslaved, die from the "loss of life-assurance" when they realize that the racial logic of the social order does not afford them

a recognizable 'self.' *Oxherding Tale* accordingly re-imagines the canonical African American quest for a consolidated ego as a vehicle for understanding and re-evaluating black liberation movements in the late twentieth century.⁴⁰ Through its experimental narrative reappropriation of the past, the novel attempts to conserve the ancestrally derived African American ideal of death with dignity while foregoing some of the destructive features of historiographical conviction.⁴¹ Andrew's 'recovery' from the diagnosis ultimately hinges upon the elevation of his desires for masculine privilege and hegemonic citizenship, and the subordination of his desires for interpersonal responsibility and democratic life. If, for Johnson, 'living' is most productively imagined as the inexhaustible pursuit of the ever-dynamic self, then how are we to read the narrative finish, in which Andrew consolidates his ego in the form of a 'passing' white middle-class householder married with child? Johnson softens the conclusion with the subtextual suggestion that the world Andrew endeavors to rebuild will be remade in the name of the dead, both black and white. Yet, the only certain efforts of Reconstruction that the reader is privileged to pay homage to Andrew's white mother, the mistress of Cripplegate, Anna Polkingham. When the narrator of *Oxherding Tale* ambiguously inserts the clause, "all is conserved; all" into the announcement of his daughter's name (176), the audience is to understand that Andrew's life has been conserved by his racial death, but that so too has the oppressive social order that mandates his death in the first place.

⁴⁰ These texts participate in liberation struggle in a tradition explored by Christopher Hager in *Word by Word : Emancipation and the Act of Writing*, Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2013.

⁴¹ Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty : African Americans and Revolutionary America*, New York : Oxford University Press, 2009.

Unlike Andrew or IM, George is a character without the intention to escape the morbid diagnosis; instead George embraces the death-bound subjectivity of one whose life consists predominantly of chronic bodily, political, and metaphysical pain -- he decides to stage an uprising at Cripplegate in retaliation for his son being 'sold-off' to Leviathan, thus severing the necrotic future and attempting death with dignity. The dispossession of his descendant and ego-inheritor Andrew overwhelms and cancels George's attachment to the future. George's experience of moving from living-death as 'Big House' butler, to death-bound subject agitating for black racial solidarity with the goal of revolution, can only end with his death by violence, a fact of which he is well aware to the detriment of his psychological health. In Andrew's effort to escape his own morbid diagnosis of too much ego, he chooses 'passing, a choice made in part as a rejection of George's racially over-determined ego. George's investment in identity and the formation of ego constituted in the language of 'racial' freedom struggle becomes an obstacle to life, which Andrew must confront and refuse in order to escape the death sentence of the Vet's diagnosis. Johnson advocates not a dissolution of identity or destruction of the 'Self,' nor does the narrative imagine it possible to live without ego, but Johnson does reject formulations of identity built solely upon a fixed historical of trauma or an ego dependent on the language of self-certainty for black men.⁴² As Andrew's insightful nemesis Horace Bannon, a slave catcher tellingly named "the Soulcatcher" warns, the statically conceived "identity" invites enslavement or death by the over attachment to 'Self.' Divulging the secret to his slave-catching and soul-catching success, he remarks, "You got to have somethin' dead or static already inside you -- an image of yoself -- fo' a real slave-catcher to latch onto" (174). Andrew's father, George,

⁴² Linda F. Selzer, *Charles Johnson in Context*, Amherst : University of Massachusetts Press, 2009.

he contends, was his quintessential victim: “He was carryin’ fifty-‘leven pockets of death in him anyways, li’l pools of corruption that kept him so miserable he begged me, when Ah caught up with him in Calhoun Falls, to blow out his lights” (174). Andrew’s rejection of George, furthermore, is counter-balanced by an important scene of filial reconciliation at the novel’s end. And indeed, throughout the text, Andrew yearns for his father’s approval despite himself, and repeatedly measures himself against George’s dictate that he “be y’self” -- an invective issued to his son to maintain an identification as black despite the death-sentence ego consolidation under this label would ultimately entail (21, 35).

We might also read this fatherly advice as an invocation of Johnson’s literary forefather, Ralph Ellison, whose “invisible” narrator’s similarly embittered grandfather offers the following deathbed advice: “our life is a war [...] Live with your head in the lion’s mouth.” [16]) Critics have read the novel’s end as Andrew’s return to an archetype of George’s identity, an identity possessed of and by an ego consolidated at the precipice of language, a racially revised identity that nonetheless honors the antecedent form.⁴³ In reading Ellison alongside Johnson, Andrew’s triumph, or ultimate escape from the morbid diagnosis exists in his ability to divest George’s identity of its repetitive injury, which enables him to embrace George again.⁴⁴ Confronted by the slave-catcher Horace Bannon, a.k.a. ‘Soulcatcher,’ at the end of the novel, Andrew’s death anxiety becomes attached to the question of how his father George had died at Bannon’s hand.

⁴³ Richard Collins, ‘Honoring the Form: Zen Moves in Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale*, *Religion & the Arts*, Feb 01, 2010; Vol. 14, No. 1/2, p. 59-76.

⁴⁴ Aida Ahmed Hussen, “Manumission and Marriage?”: Freedom, Family, and Identity in Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale*, *African American Review*, Jun 01, 2008; Vol. 42, No. 2, p. 239-253; Rudolph P. Byrd, *Oxherding Tale and Siddhartha: Philosophy, Fiction and the Emergence of a Hidden Tradition*, *African American Review*, Dec 01, 1996; Vol. 30, No. 4, p. 549-558.

Desperately, Andrew wishes to know the quality of his father's death and whether it was dignified, or included last words -- an important aspect of African American death ritual.⁴⁵ Death strips down and reveals the answer: illustrated across the surface of his torso are the images of lives extinguished inked over the skin in beautiful and horrific detail. Moreover, the Soulcatcher explains the quality of George's murder as a merciful act of wish-fulfillment for a man anguished and fatigued from chronic, unrelenting, catastrophic psychic pain -- the last wish of the death-bound subject is for the torment of waiting to end -- George is apoptotic.⁴⁶

Andrew claims a 'self' rooted in family, and specifically identification with his father by imagining his inheritance of George's identity as honorific of the dead, as tribute to the dying wish of his father. Offering description of the Buddhist afterlife, Andrew explains the gravity of life-death-rebirth cycles in this philosophical tradition thusly: the "profound mystery of the One and the Many gave me back my father again and again, his love, in every being from grub worms to giant sumacs, for these too were my father and, in the final face I saw in the Soulcatcher, which shook tears from me -- my own face [...] I was my father's father, and he my child" (176). 'Being' in the figurative iterations of life, death, and rebirth traced on the surface of Death's skin is an artifact of imagined cycles of intergenerational identity performance, ancestral reference, self-invention, and posthumous continuity through survivor remembrance. At the same time, however, Andrew comes into a livable ego precisely by assuming the role of the white male householder bequeathed the resources to "rebuild" the world by a father whose last

⁴⁵ Suzanne E. Smith, *To Serve the Living : Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death*, Cambridge, Mass. : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010.

⁴⁶ Daylanne K. English, *Each Hour Redeem : Time and Justice in African American Literature*, Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

wishes he has disavowed. *Oxherding Tale* thus ends by returning to the trope of terminal diagnosis, even as it does so in the name of revision, recovery, and remission of the mortal condition.

Johnson's distinctions between a living-death and a death-bound life, between the complex, regenerative process of "Being" on the one hand, and attempts to approximate a stable 'Self' in language on the other are riddled with metaphysical considerations arriving out of Buddhist philosophy and theories of identity drawn from the Western canon. Johnson honors the form of the slave-narrative in the contemplative meditation on the metaphysics of language as the vehicle for 'Being,' but expands the form with anachronistic irreverence for history as deterministic of Self.⁴⁷ Early on in the narrative, Andrew's tutor and vegetarian philosopher Ezekiel Sykes-Withers expounds a dualistic philosophy of gender and identity: "All our works, male works, will perish in history -- history, a male concept of time, will vanish, too, but the culture of women goes on, the rhythms of birth and destruction, the Way of absorption, passivity, cycle and epicycle" (31). While Andrew regards Sykes-Withers's theorizing as dubious, questioning whether his source is an oracle of truth or a "crackpot Anarchist"(32), the tutor remains at the very least an influential contributor to Andrew's developing understanding of the relations between mortality, gender, and identity. And Andrew, in like fashion, will come to wonder whether "men were unessential, and in the deepest violation of everything we valued in Woman" (55):

On my way to the hills, I entertained, nervously, pulling at my fingers, the possibility that the sexual war was a small skirmish -- a proxy war, with women as the shock troops for a power that waited, mocking the thoroughly male anxiety

⁴⁷ Timothy A. Spaulding, *Re-forming the Past : History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*,

⁴⁷Columbus : Ohio State University Press, 2005.

for progress, ready to (s)mother the fragile male need to build temples to the moon; ready, as in Patrick's case, to remind us, without hope of redemption, that though men were masters -- even black men, in the sexual wars -- we could not win (55-6).

The lethality of 'Woman' figured here as the great and indifferent destroyer of culture and civilization, considered as a primordial power created in a habitual binary opposition between (m)Other and (s)On(e). 'Woman' as concurrently the aetiology of sustenance and destruction in the world is an argument that Johnson excavates in successive waves of explication, bringing an ironic authorial eye to bear on the reliance of Andrew's ego on rejection of the imagined source of life and death, his own mother.⁴⁸ And, though Andrew's tutor Ezekiel focuses his intellectual energies on the study of Woman, the reader learns from the narrator that "women frightened him," a narratorial wink to the reader that undermines Ezekiel's authority as well as Andrew's later theoretical exaggerations on the relationship between gender and death, or 'Woman' and 'Being' (29).

Johnson's coupling of the social disenfranchisement of white women and black men amplifies the morbid outcome of patriarchy. This is never more true than in the scene between the enslaver-cannibal Flo, to whom Andrew is bonded for execution by sexual exploitation, yet also equally manifest in his relationship to Peggy, the white middle-class woman he marries in the 'racial' postmortem. Her physician father is the de facto 'master' of their family finances. "Again and again, and yet again the New World said to blacks and women, 'You are nothing.' It had the best of arguments to back this up: night riders" (76). Johnson's narrator here identifies 'Death' rather than 'Woman' as the category that nails down 'racial' identity in the discourse of the Americas -- night

⁴⁸ Jeffrey B. Leak, *Racial Myths and Masculinity in African American Literature*, Knoxville : University of Tennessee Press, 2004.

riders rather than wives keep black men running. The ignoble death of lynching victims -- the desecration of the corpse, the clandestine at best burial, the threat of disarticulation by hanging and pre-mortem sacrilege of family bonds -- these white supremacist death rituals are thematic in 20th century African American literature.⁴⁹ *Invisible Man*, though less concerned with the metaphysics of death and gender as they bear on black masculinity in any explicit sense, does foreground the near-death experience of encounter between white femininity and black masculinity in the meeting between IM and Sybil. But whereas Sybil is the figure of white progressive femininity attempting alliance with democratic interracial struggle -- yet unconsciously rehearsing the erotically-charged because power-laden fantastical encounter between the mythical black male rapist and victimized white woman -- Flo is self-consciously enacting role-reversal, performing the reactionary inversion of 'black-rapist' mythology in her cannibalistic ego-devouring sexual exploitation and subsequent murder of her ultimately unfortunate hostages.⁵⁰ Johnson reminds the reader that Death for black men is a sign that has historically taken the shape of white women, and that simultaneously "genderized" Being is a process that depends on the signifier of Death (50). Woman is a mystified category throughout *Oxherding Tale*, yet Johnson's authorial choices abuse the credibility and pretensions of men making identity claims based on the stability of this category. At the same time, Johnson's narrative closes with Andrew escaping the morbid diagnosis of attachment to 'Self' through securing an identity that is in complete accordance with patriarchal social norms: except for the fact of Andrew's 'passing' and thus revenant 'Self' at the close of

⁴⁹ Evelyn M. Simien, ed., *Gender and Lynching : the Politics of Memory*, New York, NY : Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

⁵⁰ Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching : Racial Violence and Memory*, Minneapolis ; London : University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

the novel, the ending might support the observations of men in the novel that Woman is the stable and life/death determining fulcrum of identity.

The scene of sexual encounter between white woman and black man saturates U.S. cultural imaginings, from journalistic tellings to literary experimentation in 20th century life. Forbidden, taboo, abject, the gravity of this encounter as catalyst for a death-bound trajectory echos throughout *Oxherding Tale*: the tale begins with Anna Polkingham's feigned surprise at 'awakening' to her husband's black male 'butler' George in her 'vice-like' full-body grip, and ends with her biracial son Andrew, the novel's 'passing' protagonist naming his daughter Anna. Andrew's father George sees his identity irrevocably shift from zombiehood to death-bound after the embittered exile he suffers post sexual encounter with his white mistress Anna. And, though Andrew's death-bound trajectory is replotted when he passes as white, he is always on the precipice and promise of return from racial death in that 'passing' for African Americans is always an ongoing, open-ended, incomplete, probationary and provisional process -- blackness is a category considered permanent in the discourses available to inhabitants of the 19th, and 20th centuries. When the Soulcatcher Horace Bannon, the personification of Death in *OH* eventually identifies William as the escaped slave Andrew, Andrew's marriage to Peggy amplifies, rather than abrogates, Andrew's blackness. Johnson dismantles the mechanics of power endogenous to the scene of sexual encounter between black men and white women -- Peggy is Andrew's ally, not accuser, in the narrative.

Through his representation and reversal of the 'black rapist' stereotype in the character of Flo, a cannibal figure whose appetite for human flesh is primarily reserved for black men enslaved on her plantation Leviathan, Johnson's critique of identity as a

deadly strategy is extended beyond the paradigm of black cultural nationalism witnessed in George, Andrew's father, to a form of self-referential white feminism, similar to that that composed by Sybil in *IM*. The feminism of Sybil and Flo constitutes itself as reactionary curative to male dominance and in relation to the corrosive erotics of lethal interracial sex between black men and white women. Flo is "dangerously solipsistic," evidenced by her inability to empathize with her victims as she objectifies and dehumanizes them unto the death of their ego, and in fulfillment of the morbid diagnosis. (81) Flo's ravenous and self-referential consumption of "fresh-meat" is not psychopathy, but sociopathy -- arising in relation and reaction to the social order of white male supremacy. Johnson pairs the disenfranchisement of black men and white women as a source of social pathology in the characters Flo and George, and a generous read has Johnson purposefully relegating the dispossession of black women in the tale to background as satirical affront to white male supremacy. Feminine sexuality, the source of Flo's compromised significance as Woman, is revalued and reclaimed as the basis for sovereignty and self-possessed identity at the expense of the black men that she sexually enslaves: "What do you feel when you touch me?" [Andrew asks Flo.] "Me." Now her lips were on my fingertips. "I feel my own pulse. My own sensations." She laughed. "I have pulse everywhere." "That's all you feel?" "Yes." (53) This is consistent with Johnson's earlier formulations of identity as deadly in the diagnosis given by the Vet: if not for Flo inasmuch as she is sanctioned socially to possess a self however subversive of white supremacist sexual dictates, then for the series of black men she selects for sexual enslavement -- men who ultimately leave their captivity in a coffin after the 'self' Flo assigns them is no longer viable.

Flo's "Way" is seductive, often giving the impression of indulgent autonomy, but ultimately proving incompatible with the existence of a livable 'Self' for the men whose egos she debases beyond rehabilitation. Under Flo's rule, the 'Self' of her victims is constructed as a fixed locus of power, thereby foreclosing the possibility of survival at the terminal of her sexual recognition for the men she chooses as partners. Flo's attempts to break free from the normative strictures of "appropriate" femininity are revealed to be devastatingly misguided, for rather than challenging the paradigm of masculine power, she reproduces it. The proverbial last straw in Andrew and Flo's relationship is not her cruel mistreatment of all of the slaves on her plantation Leviathan, not her imposition of destructive drug addiction on Andrew, not even coercive sex per se, but sex that demonstrates Andrew's extraneousness as a Self. Andrew begins to die of the same disease as his predecessors when Flo treats him as a sexual object rather than a man:

Then Flo began to rub against me in a raw, hard way. It was, I thought, like using me as a kind of scratching post. What the action said was: What good are you? You have failed to rouse me. Be still while I satisfy myself. And ever she did this the pain was quick, the insult deep, the self-hatred more complete, and I did not, as she worked toward detumescence, truly exist. (73)

Andrew's resentment in this scene explicitly recalls his earlier stated masculine anxiety that "men [are] unessential" (55), banished to a life of surrogate, and at best, artificial meaning. Finally in the last sexual encounter between Andrew and Flo, she impersonally relegates Andrew to the status of sexual object entirely, leaving him with no agency in the sexual act or recognized 'Self.' Andrew experiences further degradation of his 'Self,' or masculinity once he in the fog of his sexual relationship with Flo becomes unable to

remember the face of his mute lover Minty. Andrew registers this cognitive lapse in memory recall as the hallmark of a lost masculinity and dissolving identity; his ego begins to kill him. In an act of ‘Self’ defense against the perceived destruction of his masculinity, Andrew violently rejects Flo, attacking her in the moment of their sexual encounter. His nose-smashing disruption of Flo’s orgasmal trajectory interrupts his intolerable sense of self-loss; he declares in the bloody aftermath, “Oh, I feel fine now” (74) to the chagrined and confounded perpetrator, however, his immediate sense of relief gives way to the growing realization that the repercussions of self-defense will be lethal retaliation.

The narrator’s finishing announcement of possessive self-certainty, “this is my tale” (176), makes it appear that he has made noteworthy progress, over the course of the novel, in the goal of escaping the morbid outcome of the original diagnosis by ‘passing’ into an identity that permits the presence of an ego, that of a married white home-owning man. Andrew’s narrative meaningfully suggests that diagnosis usefully propels one to abandon of dubious prospects of redemptive historiographical practice, even as diagnosis also engenders the hope for integration of a humanist ‘Self’ into a universal ‘Being’. Ironically, Andrew, at novel’s end, would appear to be variously (un)dead despite his new livable identity, rehearsing the past in naming practices (our daughter Anna) that conserve and reify the previous racially oppressive social order he inhabited on CrippleGate.

In both life and literature, the morbid diagnoses of egolessness and self-certainty are survivable only by a constant vacillation between the two, or in the ‘racial’ afterlife. The work of mindful memory, of conserving, creating, and striking a viable balance

between identity dissolution and ego-consolidation is a task that remains a formidable undertaking, appearing at best as “real, but forever out of [our] reach”(*Oxherding*,17). Like Andrew, IM’s morbid diagnosis of zombiehood follows him in his efforts to recover from the dis-ease of living death at each narrative turn. Yet, as explicated in the scenes of public speech, spoken word, and expressive Blues, Ellison’s literary play manages to formulate black masculine identity as a ‘moving-target’ in language, tempering the diagnosis of a living-death as well avoiding the death-bound life by a kind of cryonic sociality. *Oxherding Tale* offers the prospect of a truncated form of survival in the ischemic sociality of the ‘racial’ afterlife.

CHAPTER 3

“DOUBLE-FISTING DEATH WITH TWO HANDS”: THE COURSE OF DIS-EASE IN ALICE WALKER’S *MERIDIAN* AND GLORIA NAYLOR’S *MAMA DAY*

“What are you continuing to do to yourself? he asked, holding her bony, ice-cold hand in his. Her face alarmed him. It was wasted and rough, the skin a sallow, unhealthy brown, with pimples across her forehead and on her chin. Her eyes were glassy and yellow and did not seem to focus at once. Her breath, like her clothes, was sour.”

--Truman, *Meridian*, 10

“At first I thought it was coming from my own body, but it was worse than sweat. A kind of rotting sweetness that hangs in the air when you pass a pile of garbage on a hot day. I frowned and put my hand on your forehead...No high fever, just barely warm. You murmured and turned over fully on your back, your arms spread out, so I could see your entire face...Yes, it was still the face of a cadaver. It had always been long and thin, but now seemed to have lost five pounds in the course of a day. Your cheekbones pressing hard against the sunken flesh that was turning a sickly pale, the purplish black circles blending almost perfectly with your closed eyelashes. My throat tightened at the thickness and beauty of those lashes, the one remaining feature that I could recognize.”

-- George Andrews, *Mama Day*, 288

Two snapshots of black women at a distinct interval of illness, near death. Their skeletal, cadaver-like physiques (metabolic), discolored skin (integumentary), hair-loss and temperature (endocrine), and body odor (renal) signal profound, systemic disregulation of health, loss of homeostasis, and extreme suffering. The novels *Meridian* (1976) by Alice Walker and *Mama Day* (1988) by Gloria Naylor have been analyzed in the scholarly literature as coming of age stories, from a feminist perspectives, through the prisms of ‘race,’ ‘class’ and ‘sexuality,’ and as examples of African American women’s fiction. These compelling and valuable readings largely ignore, however, the sign of

‘death’ and *thanatropic* discourse that organizes both of these novels.⁵¹ They are critically acclaimed post-Civil Rights Era pieces of fiction that imagine the dynamics of dis-ease, intimacy and interdependency between a black woman character and her beloved community. *Meridian* and *Mama Day* are most prominently pieces of *ars moriendi*, or ‘deathart’ a term coined in translation by literary theorist William Watkin’s in his substantive work *On Mourning : Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (2004).⁵² Though Watkins compendium of analytic modes for reading deathart is expansive, the specific context of black experiences with death and dying in North America, (and the literary representations of this experience) demand the reader be familiar with aesthetic antecedents rooted in African death ritual, as well as contributory factors to black disease burden and morbidity that emerge out of historical conditions of enslavement, apartheid, and continuing ‘racial’ oppression.⁵³

The course of disease in human life is inevitably terminal, unless one dies from acute or accidental trauma.⁵⁴ Perhaps because of this ubiquitous human reality, aging and decline are aspects of human experience that are richly represented in art and ritual. In African American artistic practices death and dying are a prominent theme -- an unsurprising fact given the unnatural causes of morbidity and unique community demands placed upon funerary traditions for processing collective grief and controlling

⁵¹ A ‘thanatope’ is a death-related trope; a common occurrence in the Humanities. See I. N. Barley, *Grave Matters: A Lively History of Death Around the World*, New York: Henry Holt, 1997; M.P. Battin, *Ending Life : Ethics and the Way We Die*, Oxford, NY: Oxford, University Press, 2005.

⁵² William Watkin, *On Mourning : Theories of Loss in Modern Literature*, Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

⁵³ K Braun, J Pietsch, *Cultural Issues in End of Life Decision Making*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000.

⁵⁴ J. K. Doka, J. Davidson, eds., *Living with Grief: When Illness is Prolonged*, Washington, D.C.: The Hospice Foundation of America, Taylor & Francis, 1997.

symptoms.⁵⁵ While deathart is an ancient and incredibly variegated field of humanistic ritual work, recent scholarly attention on the thanatropes of disease and dying have focused primarily on reading creative expository writing and memoir rather than fiction. The majority of this literary analyses of thanatropes have drawn from Continental Theory, exclusive of African diasporic paradigms of death and dying.⁵⁶

However, Creative-writing and fictional representation of death and dying by African American novelists in the 20th-century abound, with a discernable shift away from male-centered stories foregrounding the racially segmented medical market-place occurring after the Civil Rights Movement. Between Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, thanatropes in African American fiction focused on acute trauma and the politics of post-mortem indignity, but the desegregation of health services and the end of *de jure* medical apartheid, coinciding with the increased number of novels published by black women authors, gave rise to an exploration of thanatropes dealing with the long arduous life of chronic disease management in the context of unequal pay, patriarchal medical culture, and unequal devotion of women's time toward care of others as opposed to the self.⁵⁷ Novelistic documentation by black women writers of the mirroring and mutually constitutive relationship between community health and individual health, between women's bodies and the collective body emerged as a powerful indictment of adverse health outcomes

⁵⁵ Sullivan MA. 'May the Circle Be Unbroken: The African-American Experience of Death, Dying and Spirituality,' In *A Cross-Cultural Look at Death, Dying and Religion*, JK Perry, AS Ryan (eds.). Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers. 1995, 160-171

⁵⁶ Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen, eds., *Death and Representation*, Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. Jacques Derrida ; translated by David Wills, *Donner la Mort*, Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1995. Jeffrey Berman, *Dying in Character; Memoirs on the End of Life*, Boston: University of MA, 2012.

⁵⁷ P. M. Kleespies, *Life and Death Decisions : Psychological and Ethical Considerations in End-of-Life Care*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2004; S. P. Kiernan, *Last Rights : Rescuing the End of Life from the Medical System*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006.

showing correlation between race, gender and chronic disease in the post-Civil Rights Era.⁵⁸

Critical reception of death has been strongly influenced by anthropology, a logical assignment of the topic to a discipline concerned with that most profoundly human event, death. Unlike birth, death is an event that humans consciously anticipate, plan for and imagine personally. However one arrives to the moment of their death, the dying has been a process necessarily inclusive of more or less disease. And though mortality is a human universal, representations of disease and death are culture-bound. In a longish quote from literary critic Shalini H. N. Khan summarizing the medical anthropology scholarship on disease-representations as cultural phenomenon, rather than an exclusively physiologically determined experience, she writes:

Medical anthropologists such as Peter Morley, for example, argue that systems of medicine are culture based and grounded in the belief systems of a particular community. For Morley, this is also true for Western biomedicine (what Morley calls Western allopathic medicine) though its patients are less aware of the beliefs and values associated with this system of medicine than participants of folk systems that do not compartmentalise medicine from other cultural domains (15). The concept 'disease' is necessarily connected to a particular culture of medicine and, as such, is also connected to the value system of a particular culture. For science historian Charles Rosenberg this is clear. He notes that 'disease' may refer to: "a biological event, a generation-specific repertoire of verbal constructs reflecting medicine's intellectual and institutional history, an occasion of and

⁵⁸ H.P. Freeman, R. Payne, 'Racial Injustice in Health Care,' *New England Journal of Medicine*, 2000; 342 (14): 1045-46.

potential legitimation for public policy, an aspect of social role and individual - intrapsychic - identity, a sanction for cultural values, and a structuring element in doctor and patient interactions (xiii).” Rosenberg argues that, “[i]n some ways disease does not exist until we have agreed that it does, by perceiving, naming, and responding to it” (xiii). These multiple meanings associated with disease, however, all depend on culture specific contexts. Indeed, the collective agreement to name the disease and to respond to it in community sanctioned ways underscores the enmeshment of what we call disease in the ethos of a particular community (2).⁵⁹

The orthographic distinction between dis-ease, (the spiritual and aesthetic experience of an uncomfortable seam in the fabric of life that abrades the surface of the ‘soul’) and the sign ‘disease’ as understood through a biomedical model is significant.⁶⁰ ‘Disease’ without a psychosocial component occludes the fact that human physical well-being occurs in relation to the ecology and environment. Physiological processes happen within the circuitry of intra and interpersonal relations, which are fraught with tension, risk, reward, compromise, and more often than not for the characters in these novels, catastrophe.⁶¹ This chapter follows the disease course, the ‘*perceiving, naming, and responding*,’ of characters who, like Ellison’s Invisible Man or Andrew in *The Oxherding*

⁵⁹ Diss.Khan, Shalini H. N.. Queen's University (Canada), ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 2011. NR78435. Charles Rosenberg, Introduction “Framing Disease: Illness, Society and History,” *Framing Disease: Studies in Cultural History*. Eds. Charles Rosenberg and Janet Golden. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1992. xiii-xxvi. For further commentary on the values associated with Western biomedicine see Robert A. Hahn’s *Sickness and Healing: An Anthropological Perspective* and Ivan Illich’s *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*.

⁶⁰ Gay Wilentz, *Healing Narratives : Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-ease*, New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 2000; MJ. Bloomer, R. Endacott, M. O'Connor, W. Cross, "The 'dis-ease' of dying: Challenges in nursing care of the dying in the acute hospital setting: A qualitative observational study," *Palliative Medicine*, Feb 26, 2013.

⁶¹ Literary analysis examining the coupling of the individual and collective body is a common strategy for evaluation disease representations, see Steven W. Thomas, “Doctoring Ideology: James Grainger’s The Sugar-Cane and the Bodies of Empire,” *Early American Studies* 4.1 (2006): 78-111, for example.

Tale, bear the diagnosis of ‘black’ in an environment where this identity presents with a high-risk prognosis due to inter-generationally chronic, as well as contemporary, forms of racial health disparity. Racial health disparity is the difference in incidence of disease or cause of death between ‘racial’ groups, of which African America’s disease burden collectively, as well as group statistics for accidental, occupational, and violent death, are deeply disturbing from an epidemiological as well as ethical perspective.⁶²

Novels like *Meridian* and *Mama Day* explore themes of disease representation in women’s deathart within the psycho-social context of 20th-century black community life.⁶³ Gender is a unique risk-factor mediating and moderating disease burden, course, and outcomes in socio-economically isolated communities.⁶⁴ Women’s deathart includes not only the expectation of that one will conduct even an elongated death-spiral gracefully. Specifically, women under-report pain and suffering, while also providing supportive palliation to family, friends and beloved community at end-of-life.⁶⁵ For example, in the opening epigraphs, the authors replicate the problematic tones of victim-blaming and survivor guilt characteristic in witness-shock -- the experience of frustration (“What are you continuing to do to yourself?” “ I frowned and put my hand on your forehead”) projection, (“at first I thought it was coming from my own body”),

⁶² Barbara C. Wallace, ed. *Toward Equity in Health : a New Global Approach to Health Disparities*, Health Disparities Conference, Columbia University 1st Annual 2006, New York: Springer, 2008.

⁶³ See for example Ramón E. Soto-Crespo’s reading of death-art in, “Death and the Diaspora Writer: Hybridity and Mourning in the Work of Jamaica Kincaid,” *Contemporary Literature* 43.2 (2002): 342-376. A, C Robben, *Death, Mourning and Burial: A Cross Cultural Reader*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

⁶⁴ See Gillian Creese and Wendy Frisby, *Feminist Community Research : Case Studies and Methodologies*, Vancouver : UBC Press, 2011, for a discussion of the difficulty of adequate representation of the relationship between women’s behavioral choices and context. Fiction is very effective as a mode to capture the quality of communicative exchange between collective and individual health.

⁶⁵ S.C. Humphreys, *The Family, Women, and Death : Comparative Studies*, London ; Boston : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983; Elaine Eshbaugh & William Henninger, Potential Mediators of the Relationship Between Gender and Death Anxiety, *Individual Differences Research*, Mar 01, 2013; Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 22-30.

introjection (“my throat tightened at the thickness and beauty of those lashes, the one remaining feature that I could recognize”), and abjection, (“her breath, like her clothes, was sour, ” “A kind of rotting sweetness that hangs in the air when you pass a pile of garbage on a hot day”), felt by onlookers confronted by mortality.⁶⁶ Both survivor and fellow victims who bear witness to physiologic and psychologic disintegration along a complex and progressive disease course experience denial, guilt and dis/identification with the *precedent*, or the one dying.⁶⁷ The psychology of the precedent is at least as fraught with ego-consolidating emotions of shame, anxiety guilt, despair, hope, as witnesses to the death, however, the precedent is also without choice in experiencing the potentially ego-dissolving emotions of sensory dysregulation, expansive perception of self-in-environment, and imagined identity transcendence to the status of ancestor. The threat of disease contagion, and the prospect of second-hand witness dis-ease contribute to the isolation and segregation of victims, with story-telling and narrativization of the onset, treatment response, symptom management, and recurrent relapse followed by remission being a therapeutic process of meaning-making for the teller and audience for novelistic deathart.⁶⁸

In brief, the first novel *Meridian* is voiced in retrospection by multiple narratorial perspectives, and tells the onset, course, and decline of the Civil Rights movement through the concurrent life experiences of a Southern middle-class black college student aged into an un-insured and underemployed middle-aged community organizer living with a chronic disease, *Meridian*. *Mama Day* is the story of the birth, evolution, and

⁶⁶Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia UP, 1982.

⁶⁷Walt Odets, Michael Shernoff, eds., *The Second Decade of AIDS : a Mental Health Practice Handbook* New York : Hatherleigh Press, 1995; Donna H. McCree, Kenneth T. Jones, Ann O'Leary, eds., *African Americans and HIV/AIDS: Understanding and Addressing the Epidemic*, London : Springer, 2010.

⁶⁸Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008.

dissolution of the relatively sovereign black political, cultural and spiritual community of fictional Southern U.S. sea-island Willow Springs through the representative life experience of Cocoa/Ophelia, a native born daughter and high status member of a revered matriarchal island family (the Days), turned Manhattan white-collar office worker and executive wife. The organization of this chapter is procedural and linear in tracking the on-set and progression of dis-ease in the individual body parallel to the dis-ease of the collective body, moving from acute phase, to the sub-acute phase, to management of chronic, recurrent, refractory pathology, to the partial and complete remission of symptoms. After diagnosis, the disease course is given by prognosis. Disease includes intermittent periods of decline, remission and relapse eventuating in the death of the individual, and potentially the collective. The evolution of incurable dis-ease over the life-course of the community and individual is anticipated by prognosticators (πρόγνωση), those whose foresight allows them to tell the future. Definitions of dis-ease and the process, course, or prognosis depend on the teller and listener sharing connotative webs of meaning and metaphor. Because individual health and community health are mutually constitutive, imbricated, co-dependent and spectral, understanding this chapter understands disease as having salutogenesis -- as a process happening in relationship to health, stress, and coping. Prognosis in a salutogenic model of disease includes the psychosocial factors that bear on wellness, creating a feedback loop of meaning wherein the health of the community is impacted by the health of the individual, which in turn is contributory in the development of individual disease. Responsive and dynamic, salutogenic prognosis foregrounds the role of language in shaping interpretation, or descriptive epidemiology. This model of disease substantiates social justice demands for

health equity. From the moment of diagnosis until the moment of death, there is an uninterrupted progression of disease that includes periods of intermittent crisis, intervention, response, remission, rebound effect and relapse into positive expression of symptoms. Causal agents in the genesis of disease include antecedent, hereditary, and environmental factors; understanding of the cause, course, and eventual outcome of disease figure into the calculus of human tolerance and coping strategies for managing and controlling chronic pain and other symptoms, whether as individual women or on behalf of an imagined community of socioeconomic affiliates.

The heroine protagonists of these novels both experience recurrent episodes of homeostatic dysregulation characteristic of renal system failure and organ system shut down -- the sweet smell of death is associated with hyperkalemia, a condition caused by the body's inability to process and filter toxins from the blood. Metabolic conditions that result in elevated blood dimethyl sulfide, as well as renal failure are causative in a sour smell. They are dying of 'bad blood,' a common disease representation in African American culture.⁶⁹ The thickest exploration of chronic pain management and symptom control from a psychological perspective on individual coping strategies and disease-related cognition occurs around the idea of suicide, and euthanasia as an 'escape hatch' from debilitating disease.⁷⁰

Representations of individual and collective intervention and treatment in these two novels concur with National data indicating that African Americans endure poorer health outcomes due preventable and treatable conditions (i.e., cardiovascular disease,

⁶⁹ See James H. Jones, *Bad Blood : the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment*, New York : Maxwell McMillan International, 1993, as an example of this conceptualization.

⁷⁰ Sander L. Gilman, *Disease and Representation : the Construction of Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS*, Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1988.

diabetes, asthma, cancer, and osteoporosis) than other 'racial' groups. Multiple factors contribute to these racial health disparities in disease. Economic and social determinants, such as educational level, socioeconomic status, and environmental factors like poorer housing contribute to these adverse outcomes. Lack of resources and information access also takes a significant toll on the collective 'racial' body, as uninsured and underinsured individuals are less likely to have a medical 'home' for preventative treatment. This means that scarce resources are inequitably dedicated to chronic disease management rather than disease prevention and wellness behaviors.

Naming and Disease Onset in Alice Walker's Meridian

The onset of disease is characterized by a phase of acute symptomatology. In the novels *Meridian* and *Mama Day*, the individual women experience intense and frightening signs of neurological and metabolic disregulation. They lose their ability to organize information systemically in electrical, chemical or linguistic form -- aphasia and paralinguistic indicators suggest cognitive processes typical along specific points in the death-continuum. Death is something that happens *to you*, dying is something *you do*; this distinction in agency and identity is crucial in these texts respective arguments of the necessity of self-coherence and shared meaning for the potential experience of death with dignity. The pathophysiology of each woman's disease remains unclear; our heroines live without diagnosis. Both present with pathological atrophy, the body cannibalizing itself in spasms of metabolic havoc, soft tissue disappearing, the wasting of mass and energy. *Meridian's* life-story depicts the childhood on-set of a potentially congenital neurological disorder, as well as cultural heredity of social dis-ease. As a young girl with a potentially fatal neurological condition, *Meridian* nonetheless goes to University and

becomes a Civil Rights worker in the U.S. South. She grows up in a middle-class Black family to educator parents whose marriage tears at the seams when the father attempts to cede title to a cemetery. An 'Indian' burial ground in the form of a giant serpent mound is preserved on the property. Meridian's father returns the deathart, or burial mound, to a survivor of the North American genocide, a Native American guy, against his wife's will.⁷¹ The site has significance for Meridian because it is there where she induces minor epileptic seizures in herself in order to experience the neurological side effects, such as hallucinations and out-of-body experiences. Meridian flirts with death by inducing the seizures, hitting her head as she slams to the ground in a dizzying fit. This play with death is a spiritually and politically formative experience for Meridian. It is her ongoing engagement with the questions (1) How does the fact of death motivate and impinge on our politics? And, (2) Given death, what is my obligation in and too life?

Walker's novel *Meridian* is eulogic, a funerary praise song, or tribute to the Civil Rights Movement. The story grapples with the ideas of redemption and (dis)grace over the disease course of a woman and her imagined community. Published in a moment of literary exploration of the incongruity between black nationalist representations of the collective body as 'masculine' when healthy, but pathologized as 'feminine' when in a state of duress, *Meridian* complicates arguments about the consequences for community survival and continuity when women bear a disproportionate disease burden. Even when following community health prescriptions to achieve higher-education, mother the collective body, and reproduce the 'nation,' women character's somatization of collective

⁷¹ This ethical gesture of respect for the dead is also upheld in Global Human Rights jurisprudence, see Lyndel V. Prott, *Witnesses to History : a Compendium of Documents and Writings on the Return of Cultural Objects*, Paris : United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009.

pathology is expected to be stoic.⁷² Just like the body of Meridian, the heroine of Walker's novel, the black collective body represented by the Civil Rights Movement experiences the sorts of adjustment and attachment anxiety characteristic of terminal decline throughout 1970s and 1980s. Walker works to rectify the disenfranchised grief and loss experienced by the black collective body of the 1970s U.S. by eulogizing the Movement and its martyr's as well as survivors. The onset of disease signaled by black student uprisings and faith-based resistance to racial oppression in the 1950s is followed by hopeful interventions of civic activism and women's education, which leads to the recurrent cycles of social relapse into racist violence, and subsequent remission of symptoms. Neither novel holds out hope for a cure, but rather hope for symptom management necessitated by the chronic dis-ease of an epidemiologic transition of astounding magnitude -- the bio-psycho-social events of captivity, enslavement, Jim Crow, medical apartheid, and institutionalized health disparities.⁷³

The discursive connection between disease response and politics is evident in the use of descriptions and representations of relapse and treatment response that occur throughout Alice Walker's narrative. Examination of treatment response and relapse highlights the connection between the aesthetic and the political, the individual and community, in these author's construction of African-American women's subjectivity, particularly the relationship between disease resistance and disease representations.

Symptom Recurrence, Social History and Collective Pathology in the Context of Environmental Factors

⁷² Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998; Nikole G. Alexander-Floyd, *Gender, Race and Nationalism in Contemporary Black Politics*, Palgrave: MacMillian, 2007.

⁷³ In Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*. Trans. A. M. Sheridan. London: Routledge, 1989, the creation of the medical institutions founding biomedical science are scrutinized as products and producers of 'racial' disease and diagnostic practices that accrete and solidify in discursive practice.

Meridian offers elegaic and eulogic recount of the birth, life, dis-ease, and death of the Civil Rights movement along with its victims, activists, martyrs and benefactors.⁷⁴ The novel has two narrative tracks, one documenting the onset and disease of the protagonist Meridian, the other documenting the dis-ease and beloved community. Walker's novel performs a *consolatio*, or a ceremonial form of rhetoric meant to comfort mourners, in addition to offering the type of biographical information for the Civil Rights Movement more appropriate to traditional obituary writing.⁷⁵

Inside the memory of Meridian's falling-out with fellow activists after she answers "No" to the question is packed the memory of her adolescent self in Church, the day she "lost her" mother in a similar incident. Meridian refuses to testify to a belief in Jesus Christ before her mother because she cannot reconcile herself to the necessity of death as a precursor to another life. In both cases, that of the failed initiation into a "group of students, of intellectuals, converted into a belief in violence only after witnessing...extreme violence"(15), and secondly that of the failed trip to the mourner's bench (and consequent alienation from her mother), Meridian is ethically torn by the question of when death is warranted. What her fellow students never "seemed to understand was that she felt herself to be, not holding on to something from the past, but

⁷⁴ See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. ... [et al.], eds., *The Oxford Handbook of African American Citizenship, 1865-Present*, New York : Oxford University Press, 2012, for a description of the relationship between funerary testimonial, oration and death-related art, and the rhetorical import of the black funeral pulpit in voicing social justice questions, i.e., the lynching victim Emmett Louis Till's mother's decision to protest lynch-law through open-coffin commemoration, or Dr. Martin Luther King's pre-mortem 'I have a dream' speech in advance of his conscious martyrdom.

⁷⁵ Paul Tewkesbury, 'Keeping the Dream Alive: *Meridian* as Alice Walker's Homage to Martin Luther King and the Beloved Community,' *Religion & the Arts*, Oct 01, 2011; Vol. 15, No. 5, p. 603-627; Leslie E. Wingard, 'As Seen Through Stained Glass: Religion, Politics, And Aesthetics in Alice Walker's *Meridian*,' *Religion & Literature*, Mar 01, 2012; Vol. 44, No. 1, p. 97-119; Christina G. Bucher, 'He came but he don't believe': Teaching Chestnutt and Conjuring through the Lens of Gloria Naylor's '*Mama Day*,' *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, Sep 01, 2010; Vol. 43, No. 2, p. 85-96; Daphne Lamothe, 'Gloria Naylor's '*Mama Day*': Bridging Roots and Routes, *African American Review*, Mar 01, 2005; Vol. 39, No. 1/2, p. 155-169

held by something in the past: by the memory of old black men in the South who, caught by surprise in the eye of the camera, never shifted their position but looked directly back”(14) . Meridian is reminded while arguing with her peers about the righteousness of retaliatory murder, of another incident during her pubescence when, while listening to her father’s voice sing in Church she discovers that she does not believe in God or an afterlife. The singing “enveloped her in anguish for that part of him that was herself – how could he be so resigned to death”(16). He practiced a “life of withdrawal from the world, a life of constant awareness of death,” in mourning for the dishonored dead, particularly dead Native Americans.

Her father’s attitude toward dis-ease and death is juxtaposed against her mother’s attitude in the novel: she believes disease culminates in the ego’s transcendence into a conscious afterlife in a Christian heaven. He believes that one survives posthumously within the cultural imaginary of the decedent’s surviving community. Meridian’s disease representation and perspective on death is influenced and comes to concur with her father’s framework. Meridian’s experience of losing her mother, of her mother’s symbolic death occurs thirteen years after her mother’s experience of her own intellectual death. After marrying and giving birth, Meridian’s mother comes to understand her mortality, thinking “that her personal life was over...she understood a look she saw in other women’s eyes. The mysterious inner life that she had imagined gave them a secret joy was simply a full knowledge of the fact that they were dead, living just enough for their children”(42). The inability to mourn the over the loss of herself creates an intergenerational trauma between Meridian and her mother, for which there are no witnesses, save the two of them, because, as Meridian’s mother puts it, “she was not even

allowed to be resentful that she was ‘caught.’ That her personal life was over. There was no one she could cry out to and say ‘It’s not fair!’”(42). Without recognition for her bereavement and social support in resurrecting a new identity, Meridian’s mother remains trapped in a type of ‘living death’ fueled by resentment and unreconciled grief, a fact over which Meridian experiences guilt. Listening to her father sing about the immanence of death in Church with the choir, (“The day is past and gone/The evening shade appear/Oh may we all remember well/The night of death draw near”) Meridian rebels against her mother’s invective that Meridian be reborn. She commands: “Say it now, Meridian, and be saved. All He asks is that we acknowledge Him as our Master. Say you believe Him,” but Meridian perceives the problem with honoring the coercive power of a ‘Master’ in the historical aftermath of chattel slavery. Her father’s “constant awareness of death” brings Meridian to “anguish for that part of him that was herself” (16). In reaction to Meridian’s refusal, her mother profoundly rejects her. Meridian ‘loses’ her mother, which is a major preoccupataion in postslavery narrative as indicated by the title of author Saidiya Hartman’s travelogue *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*.⁷⁶ Once her “mother’s love was gone, withdrawn” Meridian is caste into a state of crisis because of this rupture in attachment.⁷⁷ In turn, Meridian has no refuge in a counter-rejection because she feels that it is “death not to love one’s mother” (17). This foundational scene in the novel illumines the protagonist’s relationship to representations of dis-ease and death as gendered events -- even as Meridian initially disidentifies with her mother’s embittered disease and sense of self-loss, with hoped for immortality

⁷⁶ Saidiya Hartman., *Lose Your Mother : a Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

⁷⁷ Gloria Thomas Pillow, *Motherlove in Shades of Black : the Maternal Pyyche in the Novels of African American Women*, Jefferson, N.C. : McFarland & Co., 2010.

through community participation while remaining in a posture of martyrific suffering, eventually Meridian rehearses the pattern in her own suffering on behalf of the Civil Rights Movement, rather than the black church.

Comorbidity and internalizing symptoms, such as depression and anxiety, afflict sufferers of recurrent disease. In the following dialogue between Meridian and her companion Truman, we see Meridian describe the waxing and waning of her suicidal ideation, her rationalization for self-neglect and hopelessness in the face of her disease, and the ongoing stress from and mirrored in the social disease of racial segregation. So too, we hear Meridian's explanation of the pathophysiology of her disease, the conditions and mechanisms that give rise to observable traits; she attributes the her condition to psychosocial factors mediated by environmental context, citing the theory forwarded in her small black Southern community of carers. Contributory factors include poor nutrition, inadequate housing, absence of healthcare, adverse community health, stress, poverty and occupational, social and spiritual isolation. These factors are moderated by Meridian's own subjective interpretation of her condition; she remains optimistic that she will recover despite periods of nihilism. Walker does not permit her protagonist's recovery though, the best she can do is represent the possibility of remission for the character. Meridian's attitude and perspective on her own health are as significant a therapeutic resource as other interventions; because she believes that she will recover she is more likely to interpret symptoms as less severe and to manifest a physiological response that is advantaged compared to the response of one without hope.

Disease Management Strategies and Goals of Care

Contemplations of death as the resolution to the difficult process of dying for the precedent are typical during long, slow, degenerative courses of disease such as Meridian's. Her childhood death-play offers Meridian a refuge from psychological pain associated with maternal rejection and primary attachment rupture. Later as a teenage mom in a troubled marriage to her high school boyfriend, Meridian self-soothes with the thought that she can kill herself. She thinks, "It seemed to her that the peace of the dead was truly blessed." And, she begins imagining "herself stiff and oblivious, her head stuck in an oven," or "getting coolly out of it [life], a hole through the roof of her mouth"(66). Suicide persists as an option in Meridian's mind once at college too, however death is no longer a refuge but the recommendation of "a voice that cursed her existence" in her head. She said to herself: "Why don't you die? Why not kill yourself? Jump into the traffic! Lie down under the wheels of that big truck. Jump off the roof, as long as you're up here...Mocking, making fun...urging her on"(91). After becoming romantically involved with a fellow activist whose womanizing she briefly sets aside, Meridian opts for an abortion once he begins dating a young Jewish exchange student from New York. Her dis-ease multiplies into nightmares wherein she dreams that: "she was a character in a novel and that her existence presented an insoluble problem, one that would be solved only by her death" plague her sleep (121). By the end of the novel Meridian eventually comes to understand, "finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them One Life"(220). One of Walker's goals is to represent death with dignity and life

with liberty mutually dependent in the continuum of ease and disease as subjectively perceived and represented by black women seeking to manage chronic pain, death anxiety, and illness.

An important layer of thanatropic discourse in the novel occurs in the closing series of short-stories about diseased people that Meridian encounters in the Southern Black community as a Civil Rights worker. The vignettes cumulatively illustrate the import of ‘the dead’ as a political actor in African American social justice struggles. The dead and the dying, and ancestors more generally, work as rhetorical agents with considerable power to influence perceptions of individual and collective health. The novel *Meridian* invokes the names of the dead and represents the nameless victims of racial health disparity as resourced by the very fact that their death is inalienable. Death is a resource that even the most dispossessed members of the beloved community have guaranteed them as an event that will accord them a platform to offer interpretations on the causes of individual and collective disease.

In William Watkin’s important thanatology *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (2004), he presents a careful and diligent examination of the functions and implications of ‘deathart.’ He opens his reading with a description of the process by which material death is rendered into an aesthetic practice:

“Loss, commemoration and ethics could be a shorthand version of the process of coming to terms with death for the individual, and together these terms form a complex interaction of different aesthetic practices. In talking of loss,... consider the truth of absence as a real event that is inexpressible and yet which demands to be put into words. Following a loss comes a period of mourning. Here the

personal feelings of the subject become intertwined with the communal demands of mourning rituals. This is the beginning of the process of losing death in the honey-trap of signification. At the end of this process should come commemoration or the making of a mark of loss. What is no longer there is given a lasting presence through an act of language or work of art. It is at this stage that real death [or] radical death...is made totally subordinate to the figures of death. Yet, it is also at this stage that the real event of death begins to return through the communal act of reading the monument. At this point where personal loss and public commemoration meet, the ethics of mourning begins”(2).

Meridian is a monument that reframes the disease and loss suffered by individual African American women as a point of ethical departure for conversations that are necessary for reconciling the incongruity of description and language used to signify on the conditions of black death in U.S. cultural memory. For example, Walker’s character Truman is in denial about the social pathology and dis-ease suffered by the black collective body, while Meridian is neurotically fixated on managing the terminal symptoms of the Civil Rights Movement.

Truman’s coping strategy is to ignore, decline to engage, and to avoid addressing the need for a treatment plan. He frames his orientation toward the dis-ease of the collective body, of which he is a part, as distant, avoidant, and pervasively phobic. He chooses to locate the disease in the past, a prefers to describe the condition of black community life as dead, to be grieved, rather than imagining the black collective body as chronically diseased. When Meridian suggests that he ought offer care and support instead of ‘running’ away, he retorts that the dis-ease is in the past. This dialogue reveals

that neither of these positions is healthy, dying for community health is logically incongruent, and ignoring community health in order to live is also impossible because of the mutually dependent nature of individual and collective health. This opening dialogue between Meridian and Truman contemplates end-of-life ethics, personal sovereignty, and the philosophical dimensions of death with dignity.

“Well, you can’t blame them for not wanting to go up against a tank. After all, everybody isn’t bulletproof, like you.”

‘We have an understanding,’ she said.

‘Which is?’

‘That if somebody has to go, it might as well be the person who’s ready.’

‘Are you ready?’

‘Now? No. What you see before you is a woman in the process of changing her mind.’

‘That is hard to believe.’

‘It’s amazing how little that matters’

‘You mean that kindly, of course.’

‘Yes.’ ...

‘Did you fall down in front of them?’

‘I try never to do that. I never have. Some of the men -- the ones who brought me home -- followed me away from the square; they always follow me home after I perform, in case I need them. I feel down only when I was out of the children’s sight.’

‘And they folded your arms?’

‘They folded my arms.’

‘And straightened your legs?’

‘They’re very gentle and good at it.’

‘Do they know why you fall down?’

‘It doesn’t bother them. They have a saying for people who fall down as I do: If a person is hit hard enough, even if she stands, she falls. Don’t you think that’s perceptive?’

‘I don’t know what to think. I never have. Do you have a doctor?’

‘I don’t need one. I am getting much better by myself...see, the paralysis is going away already.’...

‘I grieve in a different way,’ he said.

‘I know,’ Meridian panted.

‘What do you know?’

‘I know you grieve by running away. By pretending you were never there.’

‘When things are finished it is best to leave.’

‘And pretend they were never started?’

‘Yes.’

‘But that’s not possible.’ (12-13)

Meridian’s assertion that it is impossible to refuse the inheritance of history, that one cannot decline receipt of the past’s endowment to the present, becomes problematic in interpretation. Indeed, one is bequeathed a history that happened without prior consent, what is left the living, and what remains, is not chosen by survivors. Yet, the interpretation of those materials gifted to the present by the past is partially decided by the living. The obligatory relations of respect, honor, protection and loyalty between the living and the dead imagined in black community life translates into political ritual in the performance of death-defying civil disobedience and subsequent stress-induced seizure

with accompanying artistic funeral procession. Meridian chooses to believe herself “a masochist” (13), an identity pinned on her by a fellow-student activist in college when Meridian refuses to avow revolutionary murder as solution to political oppression. A decade later, she admonishes Trueman that the members of the community she serves are, “grateful people...they appreciate it when someone volunteers to suffer”(11). When Truman arrives and finds her corpse-like body being carried home by a cadre of local men in a state of rigour post-seizure, he is chagrined by her masochism and alarmed by the state of her morbid health, but he is unable to process disease in his own life..

Responsivity: Interventions and Treatment in Meridian

The explication of the protagonist’s disease course and her potentially terminal illness has in previous critical readings focused on the toil taken by racial and sexual violence on the human psyche. Walker’s thanatropes are wildly varied and rich with significance, including pedophilic undertakers, Native American burial mounds, cannibalized children, decomposed drowning victim brought to display before a City Council, funeral testimonial by a bereaved father of a martyred son, corpses on display, and (un)buried body parts. The role of the protagonist’s seizure disorder, as it figures into her spiritual and political life choices, has been set aside in scholarly readings of Walker’s novel. The reason that themes of undiagnosed illness, chronic and terminal disease management, and medical establishment hostility toward vulnerable patients have not been analyzed as of yet can be partially attributed to the way Walker represents disease in the novel. Walker represents life-threatening chronic disease as ubiquitous in the sufferer’s life, while at the same time never being a full summary of anyone’s life. The protagonist’s neurological condition presents as invisible to the reader because of its

implication in and co-morbidity with psychological disturbance resulting from childhood sexual abuse and maternal rejection. The tumultuous social and political context of the story confound Meridian's diagnosis and is contributory in the progression of her illness. Management of a potentially fatal chronic disease is the struggle that the protagonist faces, and she does so within the context of a social and political life circumscribed by racially motivated violence and sexual discrimination. None of the multiple narratorial voices directly address the etiology, prognosis or full symptomatology of Meridian's illness in one location in the novel. Instead, this information is fragmented and filtered through the multiple voices comprising the roughly chronological short stories that make-up the narrative. The protagonist does not self-diagnose as sick physically, but rather she experiences herself as ill when in the context of pathological interpersonal relationships and secondly, within the context of racist institutions.

In the opening of the novel, Meridian is ten years out from the hey-day of the Civil Rights Movement and still carrying on the struggle in the rural Southern town of Chicokema. She is processed down the street to her unfurnished home as if dead on the shoulders of pall-bearers after yet another stress induced seizure brought on by a brush with death during conflict with police. Meridian fell to the ground and seized on the way back from a demonstration intended to desegregate the macabre curio display of a dead body. After falling to the ground Meridian is reorganized by her attendants into a corpse pose, hands neatly folded across her chest looking like "death eating a soda cracker" (11). Once delivered home by the symbolic pallbearers, Meridian is queried by Truman as to whether she has seen a physician about her undiagnosed though seemingly terminal illness. He remarks, "I've never understood your illness, the paralysis, the breaking

down...the way you can face a tank with absolute calm one minute and the next be unable to move. I always think of you as so strong, but look at you!” The question sets off a series of memories about her prior contemplations of death, first as a thirteen year old girl at church with her parents, and subsequently in her college activist days during the Civil Rights struggle. While Trumen holds her hand in the post-epileptic haze, Meridian recollects being asked the question: “Would you kill for the Revolution?” by fellow student activists ten years in a confrontation that severed her ties to Saxon College friends (11-19).

Saxon College is a nightmarish institution founded on an old plantation, at the center of which lived an old and very large Magnolia tree named Sojourner. Under the bows of this tree in its youth, an old story-telling slave named Louvinie buried her severed tongue in a ritual meant to preserve her spirit’s ability to sing after death. Her master had cut out her tongue for telling a story of such horrific power to the children that his only son experienced a heart attack. Louvinie’s story of kidnapped white children being buried alive up to their neck in rows and used as snake body warmers gets her tongue amputated. Her recovery of the severed body part and its ritual burial during an eclipse “under a scrawny magnolia tree” saves her from the “singer in [her] soul [being] lost forever to grunt and snort through eternity like a pig”(34). The Magnolia tree became large and known as the ‘signing tree’ and it was under this tree that a group of pallbearers including Anne-Marion and Meridian attempt to sacralize the corpse of an indigent, sexually abused girl, Wile Chile. Turned away and refused access to the Saxon College chapel by the president for Wile Chile’s funeral, the mourners and students gather instead at the Sojourner for the funeral. The president and the Dean of Women,

(alternatively known as the “Dead of Women”) are both symbols of African American accommodation and acquiescence to institutionalized racism from the perspective of the student activists attempting to mourn the tragic death of a homeless neighborhood youth.

Indifference to the suffering and death of the Wile Chile and her younger brother by the college and the larger community are characteristic of and contributory to the web of environmental factors that shape individual African American women’s health in the novel. Meridian’s dis-ease is ambiguous only if wrenched from the psychosocial context of institutionalized racism, inequitable resource distribution and environmental stress. Walker presents her protagonist’s personal health history as rooted in the context of African American life in the U.S. South. For example, Meridian interprets her early experiences of seizure as ecstatic communion with nature and the dead in a surreal park-like Native American cemetery in the collective ancestral grave of the U.S. South. These experiences of post-seizure ecstasy and paralysis persist into adulthood, and mediate Meridian’s relationship to ethical life. As a little girl Meridian hears a tale of her heroic great grandmother whose nervous constitution she inherits. This story told about her great-grandmother’s similar ‘nerves’ and her unconventional yet liberating behavior allows Meridian to understand her seizures as spiritual occasions during which she can gain insight and transcendence. Throughout the novel, Meridian struggles with conflicting definitions of her health status. By the time she reaches college, she is at-risk of death from seizures that are partially induced by environmental stress. Unable to deal with Meridian’s bed-ridden proximity to death as well as her refusal to avow revolutionary murder, Meridian’s best friend and dorm mate ends their relationship. She is then abandoned by her boyfriend by whom she is pregnant, and subsequently leaves

college to heal her soul through continuing Civil Rights work despite the slowdown of the Movement. After returning to rural, working-class Southern Black community life, her seizures become part of her dis-eased identity. She is near death herself but not ready to let the Movement die and hence a martyr. The sacrificial subject or martyr is a stock figure in African American literature.

Thus, Meridian's health status deteriorates as she alone toils on in rallying, marching, demonstrating, and canvassing voters in the rural South, all the while neglecting her own well-being. After each stressful encounter with racist individuals and institutions, the main character suffers epileptic seizures and becomes comatose. The people on whose behalf she continues to agitate against inequality care for her by supplying her with a home, food and minimal basic needs. However, she does not have enough care to stabilize health-wise or to recover from her downward health spiral until after the return of her old friend and lover Truman Held. This novel presents the main character's illness as a spiritual 'dis-ease' as well as a physical affliction exacerbated by ravages of racism and inequitable access to material and civic resources. Throughout the novel, Walker presents the protagonist's illness as only comprehensible when contextualized by the historical events and political struggles in which the character is engaged. Remission is accomplished and symptoms controlled once the toll of social dis-ease is redistributed so that a greater share of the grief and burden is held by black men.

The absence of adequate funerary observance and interment for the victims of racial oppression, symbolized by the treatment of Louvinie's tongue, sentences the Civil Rights Movement's afterlife to an impoverished and debased existence in the collective cultural memory. Exposure to and survival of this community dis-ease (disrespect toward

the dead being just one symptom, and is contributory to Meridian's recurrent bouts of neurological dysregulation, with progressively pathological deterioration of her metabolic functioning. Victims like Wile Chile and her younger brother are denied fair life circumstances as well as dignified posthumous circumstances. In the case of the younger brother, like many historical examples of corpse mutilation and non-consensual dissections, his body is desecrated in an act of exploitation by the medical establishment. The psychic cost and social consequence of un-commemorated victims is significant, for the students end up turning their grief and anger inward and direct their bereaved energies toward the 'signing tree' Sojourner. They dissect Sojourner and thereby dismantle the memorial to the dead Louvinie only after they are denied the right to memorialize Wile Chile. Misdirected mourning and grief have the outcome of obliterating a history of resistance to racial oppression by enslaved African Americans on the Saxon plantation. The Sojourner, like other memorials to the dead, had accrued other ritual meaning related to African American experiences with morbidity, specifically a ritual commemorative observance for an unwed mother who murdered her infant in order to hide her shame. Dissection of the giant magnolia tree and memorial by the frustrated mourners at Wile Chile's aborted Chapel funeral is a symptom of unrecognized and misdirected grief by the students and community around Saxon College.

Relapse Prevention and Dis-ease Control in Meridian

The protagonist's illness in Meridian is the outcome of both a life-threatening congenital neurological condition and spiritual wounding inflicted by multiple personal and political betrayals. Meridian does not understand Truman to be returned on a mission to save her life, and neither does he understand himself to be instrumental in that goal.

Upon his arrival to Meridian's humble, rural Southern room, Meridian tells him, "We really must let each other go, you know," to which he retorts, "You mean I really must let you go. You cut me loose a long time ago" (20). The arch of Walker's novel illustrates however, that releasing the past and those attachments is a process fraught with near-fatal strain. The past that haunts Meridian is personal, a baby given up for adoption, an unwanted abortion, alienation from her mother, ruptured relationships with friends, as well as political.

Walker is critical of self-neglect while also calling into question the ethics of martyrdom and death-related politics. Martyrdom is a self-annihilation that is socialized as heroic self denial for black women. In the following scene of adolescent experience of suffering and stoicism, Walker makes the absurdity of self-neglect evident. The picture of Meridian's illness emerges for the reader in layers as the short-stories each create new details of her condition over her lifespan. Events move from earlier in the protagonist's life to her eventual recovery. Meridian gives up her son for adoption after deciding to leave her husband and return to school, she does "not think seriously of going to a doctor" because of her financial situation (123). Among her symptoms are hallucinations, distortions in color perception and fainting followed by unconsciousness. After an episode of fainting and unconsciousness on her campus, Saxon College, she finds herself at the campus doctor's office where: "without waiting to hear her symptoms he had her lifted up on the examination table – using his best officious manner before his nurses – and she was given a thorough and painful pelvic examination. Her breast were routinely and exhaustively felt. She was asked if she slept with boys. She was asked why she slept with boys. Didn't she know that boys nowadays were no good and could get her

into trouble? ” (123). This incident exemplifies the problem and history of poor or inadequate diagnostic processes used with patient’s of color in U.S. medical culture. It also foregrounds the history of abuse suffered by vulnerable patient’s at the hands of unethical medical professionals.

The physician here does not diagnose her illness, and consequently when Meridian returns to her college dorm room, “she returned sicker than when she left. Happily, two days later, neither the fainting nor the blue-black [light] spells had returned. Then she found – on trying to get out of bed – that her legs no longer worked. Since she had experienced paralysis before, this worried her less than the losing of her sight” (124). However, as the days go by and Meridian experiences continued neurological disturbances and paralysis in her college dorm room. Her room-mate Marion-Anne and to Meridian who, “discovers herself...with no appetite whatsoever. And to her complete surprise and astonished joy, she began to experience ecstasy...she felt warm, strong light bore her up and that she was a beloved part of the universe; that she was innocent even as the rocks are innocent, and unpolluted as the first waters,” which Marion-Anne finds bewildering (124). Despite the continued problems with her health, Meridian does not return to see a doctor.

A decade later when Truman, the estranged once-revolutionary playboy returned to make amends, he finds his college comrade and life-long friend dying of an undiagnosed disease. He struggles to respond with empathy, and becomes increasingly responsible for the social dis-ease created in the afterlife of the Civil Rights Movements for surviving activists like Meridian. As Truman’s fuzzy insight into how his disposition toward Meridian’s illness and the social pathology of racism have been

characterized by avoidance and denial, he becomes more willing to engage in relapse prevention, symptom management, and supportive palliation, although in the process he succumbs to the dis-ease brought about by recognition of the severity of the chronic, terminal condition. By the novel's end, "Truman felt the room begin to turn and fell to the floor. A moment later, dizzy, he climbed shakily into Meridian's sleeping bag" and wonders if "Meridian knew that the sentence of bearing the conflict in her own soul which she had imposed on herself -- and lived through-- must now be borne in terror by all the rest of them" (242). As it turns out, Meridian's illness recedes into remission after her coping decision that unresolved grief and attachment both individual and collective past is killing her. In the final chapter entitled 'Release,' Meridian attempts to relinquish attachment to individual and collective history, yet Walker's plot ending doesn't allow the reader to subscribe to the notion that attachment to collective history can be voided so easily for the sake of personal recovery from dis-ease.

As Meridian attempts to consolidate her remission by extricating herself from the collective body, Truman laments her decision, "I hate to think of you always alone." Meridian counters, "But that is my value. Besides, all the people who are as alone as I am will one day gather at the river. We will watch the evening sun go down. And in the darkness maybe we will know the truth" (242). The river is a euphemism for death, a well-used metaphor in black English vernacular of liminal watery space that is crossed spiritually upon passing. Truman's return and presence enables Meridian to work through the trauma of racial violence and find the grace to 'release' the pain of the past, ending her sole vigil as Southern Civil-Rights worker ten years post-movement. However, Walker betrays the futility of her heroine's strategy in the novel's elegaic close. What

floors Truman after Meridian's lone departure is a poem left by Meridian for him. It reads, "whatever you have done, my brother...know i wish to forgive you...love you" (242). The wish to forgive and forget the past is a futile strategy for recovery, although it is a cognitive movement that enables disease representation that is less debilitating than blame and negative attributions of disease causality to the actions of others. Walker argues that individual health flows back into the river of humanity and our collected stories of death and dying such that social dis-ease and singular disease are interminable aspects of health and wellness to be managed together -- despite Meridian's remission, the social dis-ease subsists in the model of individual symptom control chosen by the protagonist; the model is contradicted by the continued pathology of racism that afflicts the collective body and (re)identified members like Truman.

We learn that Meridian understands her dis-ease as a social and familial sickness; a pathology in the living's relationship to death and the dead. When Meridian's mind returns to the present she is laying in her house with her once lover and longtime friend Truman after the protest in Chicokema town square. By way of the Church memory packed inside of Meridian's memory of leaving college after her ejection from the political group headed by her antagonist Anne-Marrion, the audience learns of the relationship between health and history in African American cosmology. Walker closes the opening chapter 'The Last Return' with a eulogy for the dead, giving the story of Anne-Marion and Meridian's failed friendship only after introducing the historical period with a roll call of names:

"MEDGAR EVERS/JOHN F. KENNEDY/MALCOLM X/MARTIN LUTHER
KING/ROBERT KENNEDY/CHE GUEVARA/PATRICE

LUMUMBA/GEORGE JACKSON/CYNTHIA WESLEY/ANNIE MAE

COLLINS/DENISE MCNAIR/CAROLE ROBERTSON/VIOLA LIUZZO (21) .

In order to understand Meridian's illness and follow her disease course, one must, according to Walker, understand that the 1960s had been: "A decade marked by death. Violent and inevitable. Funerals became engraved on the brain, intensifying the ephemeral nature of life. For many in the South it was a decade reminiscent of earlier times, when oak tress sighted over their burdens in the wind; Spanish moss dragged bloody to the ground; amen corners creaked with grief; and the thrill of being able, once again, to endure unendurable loss produced so profound an ecstasy in mourners that they strutted, without noticing their feet, along the thin backs of benches: their piercing shouts of anguish and joy never interrupted by an inglorious fall. They shared rituals for the dead to be remembered. But now television became the repository of memory; and each onlooker grieved alone" (21). The full paragraph is offered in italics immediately after the roll call of the martyred by Walker as explication of disease course.

Meridian grieves alone and continues re-enacting the funerary rituals to remember the dead within a pathological social context. The novel represents dis-ease and near-death states are accompanied by a special kairos in African American political struggle during the Civil Rights movement. Further, the timing of political struggle and its relationship to death during the "decade marked by death" reverberates with prior rhetorical situations when death occasioned protest movements, for example, the anti-lynching campaigns of the early 20th century. Meridian's comas are induced in part by environmental stressors. During her undergraduate stay at the private historically Black college that she attends on scholarship after the break-up of her teenage marriage and the

loss of her child, Meridian is afflicted by bouts of paralysis and catatonia when she encounters physical and social violence. While canvassing voters, we learn that Meridian witnesses a homeless pregnant thirteen year old African American girl, the Wile Chile, pick through rotten trash looking for food near her college. Later that day Meridian is found by the other students in her room “lying like a corpse on the floor beside her bed, eyes closed and hands limp at her sides. While lying there she did not respond to anything; not the call to lunch, not the phone, nothing. On the second morning the other students were anxious, but on that morning she was up”(24). The generalized seizures that Meridian suffers from are accompanied by changes in her sensations and awareness of her surroundings.

Meridian’s dis-ease cannot be understood or properly diagnosed outside of this context, in which exposure to unnatural morbidity is traumatically high. For example, in the case of Wile Chile’s younger brother, “it was rumored that he was stolen by the local hospital for use in experiments,” but, the narrator of the novel points out, “this was never looked into”(23). The high morbidity rates in Meridian’s community are compounded in their traumatic effect by the knowledge that systematic injustices against African Americans have been perpetrated by the medical establishment, hence inciting mistrust and justified fear that Black life is not respected. When Meridian’s efforts to secure the pregnant homeless teen some care at “schools for special children and then homes for unwed mothers” the results are nil; instead Wile Chile is crushed by a car like a stray dog running across the street in her scared flight from Saxon College. Neither Wile Chile nor her younger brother have a ceremonial interment attended by their loved ones. The community’s opportunity to mourn and have their bereavement publically acknowledged

is destroyed, hence the opportunity to incorporate the spirits of the children into the afterlife of the Civil Rights struggle is diminished.

Remission in Meridian

In *Meridian*, the role of the protagonist's seizure disorder, as it figures into her spiritual and political life choices, has been largely set aside in scholarly readings of Walker's novel up until now. The reason that themes of undiagnosed illness, chronic and terminal disease management, and medical establishment hostility toward vulnerable patients have not been a focus can be partially attributed to the way Walker represents disease in the novel. Walker represents life-threatening chronic disease as ubiquitous in the sufferer's life, while at the same time never being a full summary of anyone's life. The protagonist's neurological condition presents as invisible to the reader because of its implication in and co-morbidity with psychological disturbance resulting from childhood sexual abuse and maternal rejection. The tumultuous social and political context of the story confound Meridian's prognosis and hope for remission. Management of a potentially fatal chronic disease is the struggle that the protagonist faces, and she does so within the context of a social and political life circumscribed by racially motivated violence and sexual discrimination. None of the multiple narratorial voices directly address the etiology, prognosis or full symptomatology of Meridian's illness in one location in the novel. Instead, this information is fragmented and filtered through the multiple voices comprising the roughly chronological short stories that make-up the novel. The protagonist does not self-diagnose as sick physically, but rather she experiences herself as ill when in the context of pathological interpersonal relationships and secondly, within the context of racist institutions.

Death Anxiety & Advanced Directives: Burial Plans and Indicated Funerary Ritual

Remission of disease doesn't indicate that one should forego advanced directives in the novel, indeed it appears that death anxiety is reduced by planning for one's own funerary ritual and posthumous memorialization in the surviving community. In the scene analyzed here from *Meridian*, the presence of deathart makes individual mortality and disease a component experience in a larger, surrealist community of meaning, which includes the dead. Inheritance of loss and grief are contributory in the formation of disease, and dis-ease. The heritability of spiritual and political malady is mirrored by the heritability of physiological disease. Meridian and her father "both shared the peculiar madness of her great-grandmother;" fits of paralysis, falling unconscious, psychosis, hallucinations, and sensations of neurological disregulation that felt like out-of-body experiences. The heritability of disease is less important however, than her family inheritance of land covered by a Cherokee funerary mound in the shape of a giant serpent. It is in the center of the snake's coil that Meridian, as well as her father and great-grandmother, went to induce a seizure as a form of communion with the dead.

Once in the coil of the Sacred Serpent's tail, Meridian's "right palm, and her left, began to feel as if someone had slapped them. But it was in her head that the lightness started. It was as if the walls of earth that enclosed her rushed outward, leveling themselves at a dizzying rate, and then spinning wildly, lifting her out of her body and giving her the feeling of flying...Her father said the Indians had constructed the coil in the Serpent's tail in order to give the living a sensation similar to that of dying; The body seemed to drop away, and only the spirit lived, set free in the world," however, "she was not convinced. It seemed to her that it was a way the living sought to expand the

consciousness of being alive, there where the ground about them was filled with the dead”(53). The presence of the dead changes the diagnostic criteria for disease. It redefines Meridian’s condition so that it is a special ability rather than a misfortune. The surreal experience of seizure in the context of the Serpent’s coil so that it becomes an ecstatic religious experience during which “she had contact with no other living thing; instead she was surrounded by the dead” (52). The ‘way of life’ referenced by Meridian in her contemplation of the Serpent mound’s purpose is one where the dead are respected and honored, specifically in the ritual observance of burial etiquette. The connection between Meridian’s recurrent symptoms (seizures, periods of weight loss, emaciation, muscular atrophy, and neurological features), and the social context becomes clear in the examples of relapse at stressful racially oppressive moments of social strife. Proximity to unnatural or premature dying without the social acknowledgement, enfranchised grief, and appropriate ethical and aesthetic routines for honoring the Civil Rights Movement and the dead causes Meridian unbearable stress, which magnifies disease symptoms and is contributory to relapse.

Onset of Disease Symptoms in Mama Day

The past that haunts Ophelia is that of her freed-person family on the sea island of Willow Springs, their secret navigations of the ‘New World’ and survival of enslavement, as well as political in the sense that she is the first-generation to move into the white collar urban work force enabled by Second Wave feminism. Naylor’s novel is an *obsequies*, a catalogue of funerary rituals at the symbolic grave of language, story-telling, and cultural memory. Obsequies are offered for un-commemorated black deaths in the creation of the fictionalized sea-island of Willow Springs, and like many novels of the

1980s written in the tradition of the slave narrative, disenfranchised grief is an individual and community health catastrophe.⁷⁸ Victims of enslavement, as well as survivors and descendants disidentified with the history of diaspora are remembered together in *Mama Day*'s wheeling narrative structure, which shifts between first and third person, the dead and the living, and the past and the present. There occurs an interior dialogue at the level of the text between characters living and dead across generations that eventually culminates in the conclusion that history cannot be overcome, the disease of the past can only be managed, like Ophelia's illness. The best that the individual and the community can do with a contributory history is strategically treat, manage and cope with symptoms, with the goal of remission.

At one level, *Mama Day* is the story of a newly married professional couple living in New York City who return to the wife Ophelia's native Georgian coastal sea-island where she falls ill to a mysterious sickness that parallels the undiagnosed condition of their island community life in the wake of slavery. Environmental calamity and tropical-storm and flooding coincide with the onset of Ophelia's symptoms. In the foreground of the narrative are the onset and progressive disease symptoms suffered by Ophelia after her old girlhood-friend Ruby curses Ophelia's 'roots' while binding her hair. Soon after, Ophelia becomes infected by swarming and necrotizing pus-filled floating lesions/parasites. When these lesions are read as the symbolic bodies of unremembered murder victims and unnamed survivors of chattel slavery, we can imagine the worms as the spectral and phantom flesh-eating hive of aggrieved history. Ophelia's dis-ease involves the question: how to treat history? What is the right memorial prescription, the

⁷⁸ Christopher N. Okonkwo, *A Spirit of Dialogue : Incarnations of Ogbañje, the Born-to-Die, in African American Literature*, Knoxville : The University of Tennessee Press, 2008.

therapeutic intervention for the past, the comfort if not curative care for accumulated history? Ophelia's disease is comorbid, both proximate to the contemporary social dynamics represented on Willow Springs - most importantly, the tension between rigid black Christian moralizing, agnostic present-minded disidentification with diaspora, and amalgamated cultural knowledge drawn from African 'Americanization.'⁷⁹ Symptoms are inclusive of Integumentary System deformation and extreme pain, and auto-immune and endocrine-system related trauma, which can be attributed to environmental exposure to an infectious parasite.

Disease representation by Ophelia foregrounds the dying as an aesthetic experience wherein the perceived integrity and socially validated aspects of black femininity are renegotiated and potentially imperilled. For example, the prospect of radical change in one's appearance is a well known threat to self-coherence and stable identity when the change is not of one's own volition. Even witnessing these involuntary and premature degradations in perceived health that result from imbalance and loss of homeostasis can be traumatic. Changes in appearance, mobility, and signs of status constitute a challenge for the diseased and their community. Coping with these changes in body weight, hair growth, skin health, energy and physical motility has particular valences for black women whose communities valorize representations of feminine health absolutely antithetical to typical deathbed aesthetics, i.e., emaciation, sallowness, coloration and visible contusions, skin irregularity, and immobility.

The novel is comprised by a set of stories about health and wellness in the family descended from the enslaver-owner of the Willow Springs plantation, and the powerful root-worker and bondswoman known only by the first letter of name, 'S' to Mama Day.

⁷⁹ A process of becoming American by enslavement and resistance.

S is able to convince the enslaver to free her children and endow them with his patrimony of land in perpetuity.⁸⁰ Ophelia's own mysterious illness, her 'dis-ease', punctuates the experience of the Willow Springs collective transformation from a largely independent though racially segregated coastal sea-island and former plantation, to an integrated and connected part of the U.S. social landscape, as symbolized by the bridge between the mainland and the island, as well as the movement by the young people on Willow Springs to integrate into mainstream U.S. occupational and consumer citizenship. The dis-ease of the collective body of Willow Springs, and the disease paralleled in Ophelia's experience construes pathology as a nemesis that must be managed without hope of ever completely vanquishing the affliction.⁸¹

Response in Mama Day

The inclination to personify disease as a nemesis, an unwanted visitor or 'death' speaks to the perforated membrane between the sufferer of disease and the physiological condition itself. The thanatope of disease, and response, relapse and remission of symptoms is often figured as a relationship between the individual and the personified disease, and a relationship between the personified disease and the larger collective body, with victim blaming being a common refrain by dominant medical institutions and within historically aggrieved communities.⁸² Ophelia presents with psychotic features, if the narratorial voice of the dead George is to be believed in his recount of Ophelia's symptoms, yet, Ophelia's city-boy husband George deals with black community dis-ease

⁸⁰ Dis-ease narratives are reproduced intergenerationally and within the context of social life by humans struggling to make meaning out of sometimes seemingly arbitrary or confounding trauma, injury, illness and decline, see Robert A. Hahn, *Sickness and Healing: An Anthropological Perspective*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

⁸¹ Ivan Illich, *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*, New York: Pantheon, 1976.

⁸² Alison Bashford, *Imperial Hygiene: A Critical History of Colonialism, Nationalism and Public Health*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

by denial, a common reaction to painful, morbid health information. George also suffers from an undefined heart condition, similar to the cardiac/ hypertension conditions suffered by Ellison's *Invisible Man* and *Oxherding Tale*'s protagonist Andrew. George's narratorial presentation of his heart disease completely disconnects his condition from the history of chronic environmental stress exposure for African Americans because of enslavement, Jim Crow, institutional apartheid, and 'race'-related risk of occupational or interpersonal violence. George's denial of his own dis-ease, and his denial that Ophelia suffers from a dis-ease related to the social ecology of black community health struggles, eventually cost him his life. He dies of a heart-attack while trying to 'beat back the past,' bashing chickens and wildly flailing inside of a coop. The chickens defend their nests from George's pillaging -- he frantically searches for something that is not there, the cure for Ophelia. Instead George finds his own identity adhered to the present tense ego, the 'I' capable of holding Ophelia. *Mama Day* suggests that George's coping style is not entirely successful, but it does facilitate Ophelia's symptom remission.

Symptom Recurrence and Relapse

The environmental causes extend to the scarcity of resources in the Willow Springs island community, giving rise to negative social appraisals of relative status, like that hostility toward Ophelia by her friend Ruby that precedes the exposure to an environmental 'toxin' -- the social ecology of post-apocalyptic plantation community reformation. Naylor revises the tradition of representations that caste 'Africa' as the source of disease, and African cultural traditions as the cause of relapse -- in *Mama Day* those received traditions are caste as curative, although Naylor does risk re-inscription of the stereotype of 'African' cultural patterns as contributory to chronic disease and acute

contagion.⁸³ On Willow Springs, the intergenerational transmission of cultural and intellectual property native to the community of freedpeople is imperilled by the unavailability of women to work as descendants for the ancestors.

Like those unremembered dead, Ophelia's disease does not have name. Ophelia's folk-medicine practitioner, great Aunt Mama Day, understands the bio-psycho-social connections between unnamed community dis-ease and the disease of her great niece, yet because she cannot name the past, she cannot diagnose the disease for Ophelia's present-minded pragmatist City oriented husband George. George demands a diagnosis and prescription to treat the disease, but he is deeply averse to engaging the incomplete environmental case-history or social heredity of community life on the former plantation island. The circulation and infestation of Ophelia's body by the parasitic worm-like sacs of puterific memory only remits once George has performed a sacrificial funeral ritual at once recognizing the past, while also grieving the irrecoverability of that social dis-ease.⁸⁴

The Swelling (*οἰδημα*) of the interstitial layers of social life with the unregulated flow, pressure, flood of history and its associated discourse creates acute suffering for the collective body unable to achieve homeostasis. Homeostasis (*ὁμοιός & στάσις*) is the dynamic equilibrium achieved when a system maintains a stable state through flexible permutation and environmental responsivity. Systemic dysregulation of pressure between sheaths of social fabric, and the associated 'swelling' of these interstitial 'tissues' with a cultural 'plasma,' the viscous linguistic substrate of cultural life, and creates painful

⁸³Barbara Browning, *Infectious Rhythm: Metaphors of Contagion and the Spread of African Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1998.

⁸⁴ See Brorsen, Stig. "The Seeds and the Worms: Ludwik Fleck and the Early History of Germ Theories." *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 49.1 (2006): 64-76, for an example of worms in history of disease representation in the medical literature.

tightness. Like the boiling fluid substrate cooked in the furnace room of Liberty Paints from the *Invisible Man* scene read in Chapter One, this linguistic substrate to cultural life is dangerous: the hydraulics must be managed with ever-ready caution.

Chapter One examined the allegorical use of hydraulics to describe the operations of language in the Liberty Paint scene where the protagonist IM vaguely discerns that shared connotative meaning and the history of 'race' in the U.S. are amalgamated under intense pressure. Again, in *Mama Day* fluid dynamics and themes in hydraulics are used to symbolize meaning, language and ritual -- water, pressure, regulation of flow, fluids, flooding and the concept of homeostasis are used allegorically in *Mama Day* to reference the dynamic and powerful processes that shape deathart. Water is also prominently featured as a source of life and death in African American literature and cultural memory, an outcome of the use of water in captivity, enslavement and commodity transport, as well as death by drowning as one of the clearest cases of racial disparities in mortality.⁸⁵ Water and fluid bodies are also featured in African American memory as portals, membranes between the living and the dead, as full of potential destructive as well as creative spiritual power.⁸⁶ George, the sacrificial subject in *Mama Day* is in the business of plumbing. He introduces himself to the reader in a longish description of his occupational grind, touching on the topics of the economy of flow, the inevitability of breakdown, the consequences of one's current choice for the inheritance bestowed on

⁸⁵ See Diss. Jon Eric Groover, *Aquatic Phobias Permeated Through African American Culture, Economics, and Politics*. Florida Atlantic University, ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 2011. 1496190.

⁸⁶ Deirdre Mullane, ed., *Crossing the Danger Water : Four Hundred Years of African-American Writing*,

⁸⁶ New York : Anchor Books, 1993; Anissa Janine Wardi, *Water and African American Memory : an Ecocritical Perspective*, Gainesville : University Press of Florida, 2011.

descendants, and the power of language as it courses through and carries all of these to either solidify or disintegrate social life :

“I had the patience to explain that nothing saved him more money than the extra money we wanted for copper piping. You buy the material at 1980 prices and waiver 1990 plumbing bills -- and there weren’t even any joints in the system for potential leakage. But with all those right angles in this diagram, wouldn’t the thing simply break? Of course, it would break, it had to break. All moving parts or parts with motion flowing through them -- in his case, water -- wore out even if the pipes were straight as an arrow. But the point was that his great-grandson or - daughter would have to worry about it, not him. I had to draw the line at why we insisted that a pipe angling right would send the water flowing left. There’s a point when you say trust us or give the job to someone else. But, yes, we could guarantee that the dame’s dishwasher on the tenth floor could run at the same time as the fag’s Jacuzzi on the first. Dame. Fag. That’s how the man talked. He was an overbearing asshole, had if he had jabbed me in the side once more with his ‘Ya know what I mean, soul brother,’ I was going to tell him what he should have read in my eyes -- he didn’t have much of a soul and he was hardly my brother” (55).

George dies of a heart attack, or something like that, after engaging in an opaque ritual inside of Mama Day’s chicken coop. He has sacrificed all of the hens, turned over their nests, smashed their eggs, and finds himself laughing outrageously at the mixture of his own scratched and hen-pecked bloody skin with feathers, manure, yolk and chicken blood. The coronary attack begins there and continues to progress with George tells the

reader, “a dull throbbing,” “breastbone that steadily worsened,” and “an iron vise in the middle of my chest,”(301). As he struggles toward Ophelia’s deathbed, he has the experience that, “the road felt like water under my buckling knees,” “glassy needles splintered throughout my brain,” and “it was impossible for me to cross over, make it up those porch steps, and into our room. I did it,” but “the worst thing about the blinding pain that finally hit me was that sudden fear that it might mean the end,” yet, the dead narrator shares with his still living and beloved Ophelia, “I want to tell you something about my real death that day. I didn’t feel anything after my heart burst. As my bleeding hand slid gently down your arm, there was total peace” (302). The opposition between ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ death signified by the narrator is curious in this description -- the reader learns from *Mama Day* that by dying on Willow Springs, George joins a community of the dead ancestors, thus becoming immortal in the collective memory. Ophelia’s atrophic corporeal body, but oedemic (swollen) social identity are reconciled by the death of George; she no longer is bound to dual identities once George dies on Willow Springs and joins her beloved community. Self-coherence is achieved for Ophelia through her management of disease symptoms and simultaneous conjugal bereavement.

The indignity of disease that results in the disintegration of ego and the fracturing of one’s sense of self-coherence as a consequence of pain is deeply alarming to Ophelia. Naylor’s representation of disease as a psychological and cognitive process that ruptures the sufferer’s sense of identity calls into question the potential for death with dignity and self-coherence at the end-of-life. The incomprehensibility of one’s own death is coupled in human experience with the incontrovertible evidence of universal human mortality. The subjective dissonance generated by the knowledge of eventual ego-dissolution, and

the self's desire to sustain can create a bitter and noxious flavor in the life of the diseased. Naylor makes a strong argument for the validity of the character's desire to die with dignity intact, to avoid being the passive object reacting to the non-consensual event of death. Ophelia shares:

"I woke up to an empty bedroom bathed in moonlight and the ever present sound of running water accompanying my grandmother's voice. Where was George? Could he still be working on the bridge? The stench was horrible in that bed and it coated my tongue so heavily that the little saliva I had was bitter when I swallowed. it was reaching a point where I couldn't stand it anymore. There is a limit to how long you can feel your insides being gnawed away without beginning to lose your mind. And I had been fighting to remain sane, for your sake as well as my own. But they were multiplying up toward my throat, and once I saw that I was spitting out worms, it would surely take me over the edge. If I was going to die, I didn't want it to happen while I was ranting and raving"(290).

Ophelia's subjective experience of being eaten alive by a history so rotten and painful that it crushes her ability to sustain sanity is pathetic; Naylor creates the scene of decomposition wherein one cannot help but affirm the sentiment by the precedent that "if" death is to happen, it should occur prior to the conscious subject experiencing their own decomposition and cadaveric liquefaction. Naylor's protagonist expresses the desire to die with dignity to not only diminish her own suffering, but to save witnesses, especially her husband from the bystander trauma and bereavement. Ophelia's vision of herself 'spitting out worms' is symbolic of her fear that the rotting history will destroy all capacity for shared meaning and communication between self and other; she fears that

language will fail to anchor her into social life and beloved community once the only thing emerging from her mouth is the puterific rantings of a woman consumed by the hungry ghosts of dishonored dead. In the scene that follows Ophelia's suicidal ideation and longing for death before the dishonor of identity-dissolution, Naylor's narrative choice confirms the severity of individual and community disease -- miscommunication between the dying and her social support have grave consequences.

George enters Ophelia's childhood home on Willow Springs after working on building a physical bridge between the island and the mainland -- what he and Ophelia actually need in Naylor's estimation is a discursive bridge to communicate shared spiritual meaning and disease representations. Instead, a radical miscommunication occurs when George reads Ophelia's need as sexual rather than spiritual. The resulting sex-act between them is narrator from George's point of view; Naylor leaves off from Ophelia's perspective in the above paragraph. Having represented Ophelia as on the edge of self-coherence, enduring unimaginable physical and psychological pain, especially due to the fear of public indignity and desire to protect loved ones, Naylor establishes a scene wherein George's efforts at sexual-healing are necessarily futile and non-consensual. Ophelia does not have decisional capacity to participate or give consent, nor is it simple for the reader to imagine the leap from feeling one's insides gnawed by ghostly maggots to sexual desire. The incongruity between Ophelia's perspective and George's is foregrounded by Naylor in the shift of narratorial voice. Ophelia's desperate response to being cannibalized by maggots is to cleanse herself in the water. When George witnesses Ophelia incapacitated by fear, horror and pain in the shower, he thinks:

“They were the hollow eyes of a lunatic. I don’t know how I got you out of that tub in to the bedroom, fighting and ranting the way you were. It took my entire body to pin you down on the bed with my elbows jammed into your upper arms and my hands locked around your face, forcing you to listen as I said over and over that it was only water. Pressed under my chest, your heart was beating as wildly as mine, the muscle spasms in your throat rippling the flesh as if it were alive. Your fingernails were digging into my back, but I kept you locked down in that position until your eyes began to focus and the spasms subsided into a gentle trembling. I stroked your wet hair and showed you my hands - -you see, baby? It’s only water. I ran my fingers along your jutting shoulder blades, collecting the tiny droplets to hold in front of your face. I did the same for your arms, before trailing my fingers over your sunken midriff, the insides of your emaciated thighs -- all to show you that it was water. Your muscles began to relax and you brought your hands around to cradle my face. The trust in your eyes crushed me. I couldn’t attain my ultimate desire to get inside you and change places with you, but I tried the best I could” (298).

When George then goes to take a shower he discovers a small “jellied substance” on the end of his penis. At first he believes it to be a drop of semen, but after closer examination, he is convinced that it is “a live worm,” which he crushes, “it left a yellowish smear with the odor of rotting garbage”(298). He returns to examine Ophelia, recalling, “I stood at the edge of the bedside, looking down at your wasted body as you mumbled in your sleep and made abortive clawing gestures toward your throat, your stomach...A fluid metal...burned as it rolled down my cheeks into the corners of my

mouth. I put my hands up to my face, it was only water” (298). George vaguely recognizes that he has just sexually violated Ophelia, and that the sex-act between them was not therapeutic but injurious. His efforts to cope with disease have turned violent, and are misinformed by the absence of a shared language to represent disease, death and intervention. He cries in shame and realization that his choice to persuade his wife that her disease was other than as she interpreted it is coercive, selfish and ineffectual as a strategy to help manage either individual disease or collective pain. This rape scene symbolizes the failure of communication and consequent danger to community continuity and health in the context of a history infected by the rotting memory of unacknowledged and disenfranchised bodies never laid to ritual rest or promoted to the realm of ancestor.

Responsivity: Language-based Interventions and Treatment in Mama Day

The central tension within this novel’s treatment of the question of whether the condition will follow a chronic or acute disease model. The onset of disease for Ophelia is acute, the rootwork begins to ruin her health quickly and catastrophically, unhinging her mind, ability to make meaningful connection to herself and those she loves. She is vulnerable because she does not have the linguistic resources for shared signification about death and disease with her ‘soul-mate.’ Amidst aphasia, seizure, urticarian parasites, necrosis, atrophy and hallucinations, Ophelia is unaware that her husband George is recruited by her Aunts for a life-saving mission that makes no sense to the New York ‘city-boy’ struggling to find the logic Willow Springs.

In *Mama Day*, Naylor explores the linkages between the individual and collective representation of disease. The narratorial voice of the dead husband recounts to the living

wife those events leading up to his demise, and his efforts to help her recover from the seemingly terminal decline of her disease; the response is revelatory of the ways in which historical violence and death involving water are implicated in contemporary African American perspectives on suffering: “It was a long walk as I stumbled through the west woods, trying to step over fallen trees and around huge sections of gorged earth. The stagnant water in those gullies held thousands of mosquito larvae that were buzzing into life as the rising sun warmed them. Another hot and miserable day. My eyes were grainy, and I wasn’t sure if I was moving in the right direction. Nothing looked familiar -- occasional glimpses of The Sound appearing blood red under the sunrise, the magnolias and jasmines twisted and stripped clean of their flowers -- until I came to the pine stump that was just around the bend from where I know I would find the old house with a large garden”(293). The ‘old-house’ is the ancestral place of death and birth for the Day Family, and the Sound is the bloody site of historical arrival for enslaved Africans to the once plantation. Again, George’s disidentification with the metaphors, language, and connotative web shaping disease-representation on Willow Springs stymies his capacity to make cognitive connections between the sacred geography, Ophelia’s experience of being eaten alive by worms, and the power of ‘the dead’ as agents in the living collective body.

Denial and avoidance as coping strategies for disease are stereotypically masculine.⁸⁷ George has a coronary condition like the black male protagonists from Chapter One, Andrew and IM. Naylor associates George with Ellison in her description of George’s health and intellectual patrimony. The impossible narratorial voice of the

⁸⁷ Steven Schwartzberg, *A Crisis of Meaning : How Gay Men are Making Sense of AIDS*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1996; S Taylor, *Coping Strategies*. In *Psychosocial Notebook*. MacArthur Research Foundation; 1998.

dead George shares his recollection of being out to dinner with Ophelia prior to the onset of her disease symptoms, describing his congenital heart condition in terms disconnected from the environmental strain of noxious racist exposure, and instead as an arbitrary artifact of childhood, “I hadn’t read any fiction more recent than Ernest Hemingway and Ralph Ellison, remembering with a sinking heart the worn copy of King Lear I could have been spending my evening with. I told you about the old movies at the Regency and you countered with surprise that anyone would pay to see things they could watch on television after midnight”(61). Trying to find some common ground at the dinner, George hopes for sports enthusiasm with no luck, thinking, “You don’t have to jog and stomp yourself to death in order to stay healthy. I should know -- I’d had a heart condition from a child, and taking long walks was all that was necessary to keep the cardiovascular system fit,” disappointed again to learn that Ophelia doesn’t like walking -- she likes to run (61). George and Ophelia learn over the course of the novel that neither stomping, running, nor walking will enable them to escape the morbidity of inherited racial violence or the social dis-ease of ‘racial’ pathology endemic to U.S. society.

Relapse Prevention and Dis-ease Control Mama Day

Mama Day employs a Salutogenetic model for representing disease, formulating symptom palliation strategies that are community-based and reflective of African American traditions of health that emphasize the personal in environment.⁸⁸ This model of ease and disease has its origins in women’s with experiences from World War II

⁸⁸ A Kleinman, Concepts and a model for the comparison of medical systems as cultural systems, *Soc Sci Med* 1978, 12(2B):85-95; Chatters LM, Taylor RJ, Jackson JS, Lincoln KD: Religious Coping Among African Americans, Caribbean Blacks and Non-Hispanic Whites, *J Community Psychol* 2008, 36(3):371-386.

concentration camps.⁸⁹ The salutogenic theory focuses on the origin of health, which rejects the pathological or medical models; instead, it places individuals on a health ease-and-disease continuum.⁹⁰ Salutogenesis focuses on resources for health rather than risks for disease and is the opposite of the pathogenic concept which focuses on obstacles and deficits and —it is a way of thinking, being, acting, that focuses on productive culturally competent coping.⁹¹ In the salutogenic framework, health is seen as movement in a continuum between ease and disease. The important principles of salutogenic definitions of health that help explain Ophelia's condition in *Mama Day* are Sense-of-Coherence, Generalized Resistance Resources, Health Perception, Spirituality and Social Support.

Sense of Coherence is a personal attribute shown to positively motivate individuals to adopt preventive health behaviors --from birth, individuals constantly experience situations of challenge, response, tension, stress, and resolution, yet the more the individual can view the self as being coherent and predictable, the less catastrophic are health outcomes in the face of dis-ease or painful social history. Sense of coherence is a relatively stable psychological attribute and is defined as the extent to which an individual's life is comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful. In *Mama Day*, Ophelia's sense of coherence is compromised by her dual identity. On Willow Springs she is Cocoa, the single female descendant of a powerful band of matriarchal rootworkers. Conversely, in New York, she is Ophelia, an average lower middle-class black woman working her way up the ladder as a college educated white-collar

⁸⁹ Becker, C. M., Glascoff, M. A., & Felts, W. M. (2010). Salutogenesis 30 Years Later: Where do we go from here? *International Electronic Journal of Health Education*, 13, 25-32. Accessed 4/21/13.

⁹⁰ Aaron Antonovsky, 'Studying Health v. Studying Disease,' Lecture at the Congress for Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, Berlin, 19 February 1990.

⁹¹ JA Holmes, CA Stevenson, Differential effects of avoidant and attentional coping strategies on adaptation to chronic and recent-onset pain,' *Health Psychology*, 1990, 9(5):577-584

professional. In Willow Springs, she is the grandniece of a Mama Day, the highly respected matriarch of the Day Family, benefactors of ancestral blessings in terms of spiritual power and land title. As a result of Cocoa's compromised sense of coherence, she feels experiences poorer social support, spiritual health, and perceives her dis-ease as incomprehensible. Until the incoherence is managed, Cocoa's dual identity and two realities are foster the conditions of disease that threaten her life. Mama Day comments on the work that remains for the living to do in order to sustain meaning across generational divides, especially across the chasm of death, saying that it is Cocoa's responsibility to the dead and to the living to understand and to become fluent in the signs and symbols of the "other place." The living are left the labor of integrating the past and the present into a wholistic and coherent sense of collective identity. The bridge between the two worlds of Willow Springs and the United States mainland is much like the bridge that George futility struggles to construct to save Ophelia's life, not realizing that the connection between Willow Springs and the United States, between black and white America, between the past and the future, and between the living and the dead can only be built out of mutually shared meaning created in language. Both language and the bridge are constantly destroyed by hydraulic pressures, leaving the labor of rebuilding up to survivors. Naylor's novel demonstrates that bridge that connects self to other, individual to community, and ease to disease can never be a permanent one; there will be a struggle and a renewed effort for every generation. Individuals with a strong sense of coherence manage stress effectively and are able to utilize available resources to maintain health.

Generalized resistance resources are defined as any characteristic of the person, the group, or the environment that can facilitate effective tension management and symptom control. For African Americans living in the ancestral burial grounds of the U.S. South and sea-islands, a general resources is the presence of burial grounds for ritual communion with the dead, as well as an intergenerational idiolect equipped with coherent meanings for interpreting racial malady in the context of U.S. racial violence. Willow Springs, where Ophelia grew-up, is a close-knit black community of survivors with a shared spiritual lexicon and cache of signs for representing ease and disease. The collective living on Willow Spring experience a temporal continuity of past, present, and future; they inhabit the geographic location of birth and death, the cradle and the grave, of individual and collective identity. Due to the distinct contractual form of land ownership on Willow Springs, the community has the benefit of stability and cultural survival. Gloria Naylor undermines any reading of the island's as a black spiritual haven -- this is the location where Ophelia is stricken with the necrotizing infestation of ghost maggots, the name of the community matriarch is lost to the forces of water and time in the moulding pages of an old-ledger, and intra-community jealousy and envy give rise to social incoherence -- the place is figured as a locus for both life-sustaining and deathly power. Meaning-making across generational divides is challenged by the growing incongruity between younger mobile workers like Ophelia and the elders who recall stories of the collective past. In this transition, the unremembered and potentially abandoned ghosts of the dead feed on the imagination of those like Ophelia who attempt to disaffiliate with the history of racial oppression, enslavement and black morbidity.

Health perception is the individual's subjective estimation and interpretation of their own health, reported in the first person and in-line with the observations of those within their own cultural community of meaning. Representative components of health perception include pain, mobility, status, and social power. The characters of African-born Sapphira Day and the Norwegian enslaver turned manumissionist Bascombe Wade perceive their health in *Mama Day* as negotiated through and determined within the interpersonal sexual dynamics signified throughout the narrative by the phrase, '18 and 23,' as in: "it was the 18&23'ing that went down between them two that put deeds in our hands" (5). Naylor includes this shared phrase and understanding by residents of Willow Springs in the story as a generalized resistance resource, an discursive asset that serves the collective body in representing disease and sexuality. Naylor's perception that black women's health is forged at the crucible of sexuality and reproduction is argued by contrast: whereas Sapphira controls collective and individual disease using her sexuality, Ophelia is deprived of sexuality as a source of palliation. When Sapphira takes Wade as her husband, and persuades him to manumit all slaves, and to cede the island of Willow Springs in perpetuity to all future generations of descendants in an inalienable contract, Sapphira uses her sexuality to establish a collective continuity of identification between the dead, the living and the unborn.

Naylor critiques the spiritual compromise that her heroine faces in moving to New York City, and away from her ancestral beloved community. For Ophelia, Willow Springs is the basis for a beloved spiritual community. Flight from social-disease and spiritual divestment from a beloved community of meaning-makers leaves Ophelia vulnerable to disease, especially because, as Mama Day explains to her husband George,

her soul is bound with his and he does not have the interpretive framework nor epistemological equipment to interpret Ophelia's malady in a manner that would ease disease of the collective body. Spirituality and religiosity are terms that are frequently used interchangeably, yet are distinctly different. Religiosity is organized worship -- in contrast, spirituality common to all humans and is organized by the experience of intra and intersubjective communication. Gloria Naylor is critical of the hypocrisy and rigidity of the black Christian Church, but reverential of the uses that organized death and ritual life. Without spiritual connection to 'the dead,' and meaningful communication about this spiritual experience both of the characters Ophelia and George face a painful disease course. George's coping system is brutalized by the systemic interruptions and imbalances of meaning that emerge out of his alienation from African-American collective spiritual life. George, like Truman, copes with the history of collective disease by avoidance, denial and present-focused alienation from the collective body of African America. He does not lament some lost connection to the spiritual world but instead sees the physical world as the only one available to redress disease symptoms, thus he searches for an intervention or cure to Ophelia condition that disregards her own disease-perceptions, self-coherence, spiritual orientation, and need for social support. George advertises that men can become skilled in manipulating the environment -- he is a professional builder/contractor/business man committed to the ideological fantasy of a free-market, despite the history of African Americans as commodities of the market and the legacy of unfreedom embodied by Ophelia in her diseased state. Nonetheless, Naylor undergirds George's description of his work ethic and rationale for business decisions with the symbols and references to collective history, the black family, home, and the

fluid dynamics of cultural hydraulics -- an allegory for language flow and cultural transmission that also references the specific relationship between African Americans and water as source of health as well as site of death.

Imagined social support from 'the dead' is a common theme in African American spiritual discourse.⁹² is the psychological and material resources that benefit individual's ability to cope with stress Antonovsky identified social support as one of the interpersonal- relational general resistance resources and suggested that the extent to which one is embedded in social networks to which one is committed is crucial to the development of one's SOC (Antonovsky, 1979). Hogan and Schmidt (2002) defined social support, specific to bereavement, as having at least one non-judgmental person who takes time to listen as the bereft express their thoughts and feelings. Gloria Naylor draws upon African American notions of social support from a beloved community inclusive of the dead.⁹³ This supportive relationship between the living and the dead is an outcome of human relationships sustained through a commitment to self-coherence and collective identity. Ophelia's indicts the absence of empathic listeners and social support for institutionalized forms of racial oppression when she notes to George that 'at least' when segregation was legal, discrimination based on race was easier to identify than in current times. Ophelia absents herself from social support by fleeing to New York; she is motivated to remove herself from the legacy of social injury and racial oppression on Willow Springs. Yet, she discovers that although she has sought to escape history, the alienation from her community of empathic listeners deprives her of the ability to make-

⁹² Recall Denver's dependence on the dead Baby Suggs when dealing with the challenges presented by the presence of the vampiric ghost of indignation named Beloved that haunts her family in Toni Morrison's 1987 novel by the same name, *Beloved*.

⁹³ Elizabeth T. Hayes, "Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* as Magic Realism," *The Critical Response to Gloria Naylor*, Eds. Sharon Felton and Michelle C. Loris. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997. 177-186.

meaning of her own physiological experience. Naylor argues that the self can only find homeostasis and wellness through meaning—and the meaning of spiritual health in particular—through commitment to and participation in the beloved community. Naylor subverts the expectation of an ending that provides easy answers to symptom control and remission maintenance, the novel doesn't provide a conclusion in the sense of a recovery from disease, just the hope of remission.⁹⁴

Remission in Mama Day

Ophelia never recovers from her dis-ease, but she does learn to manage. Coping with the symptoms of her condition becomes easier over time, and her perception of disease evolves in such a direction that she establishes a new normal. However, relapses happen, taking her by surprise -- this is especially challenging when she has engaged in cognitions around the disease that are denial-based. At the close of the novel she is a forty-seven year old woman, eleven years removed from the onset of symptoms, but vulnerable yet to the relapse:

“What I thought had become a light, airy space turned into an abyss opening up within me. All the painful adjustment during those eleven years had been for my life without you -- the emphasis on my loss, my life -- while a missing photograph shifted it over to a loss that was more than me, more than even you. I remembered Mama Day had kept our photographs, and I simply phoned her to send me one of your pictures. Little George was curious about it, I said. And when she hesitated saying that she wasn't sure where she'd put them after all this time, that eternal emptiness yawned in front of me. My voice steadily rose. Couldn't she just look?

⁹⁴ Amy Levin, “Metaphor and Maternity in Mama Day,” Gloria Naylor’s Early Novels. Ed. Margot Anne Kelley, Gainesville: U P of Florida, 1999; Trudier Harris, *The Power of the Porch. The Storyteller’s Craft in Zora Neal Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan*, Athens, GA: The U of Georgia P, 1996.

Couldn't she just try? And to think of what was lost brought on the final tears.

They were, as she had warned me, the most bitter. And with all I had build around me, I felt that I was in danger of being swallowed up inside the pain of the growing awareness that it was no more. She listened patiently as I cried -- no reasoning to anything I was saying -- about how desperately I needed a picture of you...oh I went on and on, bitter tears"(310).

The ideal of the sacrificial subject, the death-bound identity whose suicidal role is revolutionary rather than reactionary, founded in love as opposed to hate, occurs in the transformation of George's identity over time in the memory of Ophelia and Willow Spring's community of mourners. Ophelia's character speaking to the posthumous George describes the continuing disease symptom management that she negotiates after his death. She shares that:

"I thought my world had come to an end. And I wasn't really wrong -- one of my worlds had. But being so young, I didn't understand that every hour we keep living is building material for a new world, of some sort. I wasn't ready to believe that a further existence would be worth anything without you. There was just too much pain in it. Yes, I thought often about suicide and once made the mistake of voicing it. I had never seen Mama Day so furious -- never. George, there was actually hatred in her eyes. There ain't no pain -- no pain -- that you could be having worse than what that boy went through for your life. And you would throw it back in his face, heifer?" (302).

The titular character Mama Day is an elder practitioner of root-work, a senior physician. It is she who prescribes the cure for Ophelia's illness; she who works an

exchange that takes George's life rather than Ophelia's. Her distaste toward Ophelia's suggestion of suicide is not sign of a universal judgement about the wrong of one deciding it is time to die, but instead a rejection of suicide as the solution to suffering. Though Mama Day voices this opposition, Naylor's overall narrative legitimates and values the cognitive space that fantasy of controlled self-annihilation affords sufferers of disease. Ophelia speaks to the dead George throughout the novel, sharing with him the shape of her life and the story of her survival. In this way, the novel stands as an extended remembrance practice, a kind of funerary ritual honoring the dead, though not just George. The novel embeds the survival story and Ophelia's recovery in the longer history of death-bound subjects in the African American experience, and in particular the fictionalized U.S. South. The dis-ease that overtakes Ophelia is a curse of hatred, laid on her by her girlhood friend Ruby, who mistakes Ophelia's career success and marriage outside of the community of Willow Springs as indication that her own life is impoverished. When Ophelia finds herself covered in small pulsating parasite filled hives, she reels to interpret the experience through the bio-medical model subscribed to by her husband George, leaving her without an empathic listener or witnessing presence for her suffering. Ophelia recalls the grotesque and colonizing force of ghostly bodies that infect her:

The fine welts spread over my body had changed in color and texture. They were like clear water blisters, softened and jelled. I held my arm up in the moonlight and touched one. It started to move. A pulsing motion as if it was breathing. And then ever so slowly, it began to sink under my skin and disappear. I grabbed the edge of the dresser to keep myself from trembling as my stomach started to heave.

With my left hand braced against the dresser, I touched another welt. The same thing happened, but I did not scream. Not with you there behind me, not with those watery welts pulsing like a living heart before slowly sinking under the surface of my skin (282).

The novel is structured to highlight the miscommunication and subsequent violence created in the conflict between interpretive modes for disease-representation. Incongruent representational practices for dis-ease and disease disturb both Ophelia and George's self-coherence, social support, and spiritual identities. Their fatal sojourn to Willow Springs for a family visit during storm season demands that they mutual engage with the history enslavement and the presence of the dead. The culmination of events that bring George's life to an end while redeeming Ophelia. Mama Day's voice, along with the other characters offer brief first person intermissions to the narrative, including recollections and retellings of the longer tale of Ophelia's family on Willow Creek, their enslavement and survival. The past is always present in the geography, ritual, calendar, community life of the place.

Ultimately, *Mama Day* argues though that the past is something to live with, rather than die by, an inheritance that should sustain rather than drain the receivers. The curative prescription offered by the elder Mama Day for Ophelia's grief at the martyrdom of her husband is to let go or work through the grief of loss associated with change of over time. *Mama Day* shares with the collective dead, not just George, when she says Ophelia is "grieving for herself too much now to hear, 'cause she thinks that boy done left her. He's gone, but he ain't left her. Naw, another one who broke his heart 'cause he couldn't let her go. So she's gotta get past the grieving for what she lost, to go on to the

grieving for what was lost, before the child of Grace lives up to her name” (308). Here the distinction between individualized grief and collective grief is foregrounded as a therapeutic.

End-Stage Decisions

There is an ethics and poetics of dis-ease and consequent mourning that undergirds the work of these two authors, both of whom are engaged with the history of African America’s relationship to death and dying.⁹⁵ Watkins’ identification of ‘the demand’ that loss makes is of particular import to any consideration of what motivates 20th century African American fiction. Though it may resist representation, death must nonetheless be ‘voiced’ in order for communal mourning to occur. The cycle of death-related transactions that happen between individual ‘radical’ death and the creation of survivor dis-ease poetics leads to the formulation of communal stories of loss, which in turn provide a matrix for resignification. These stories offer a frame of reference for individuals working to interpret public memorials and other forms of ‘deathart.’ The novels *Mama Day* and *Meridian* create a ‘lasting presence’ in their representations of dis-ease as the first step in the individual and communal coming to terms with death.⁹⁶

Like the thanatope of diagnosis examined in the previous chapter, the thanatope of dis-ease in these narratives has been shaped by the conflict between a (1) African American holistic perspectives on life and death informed by vestigial African derived cosmologies and a (2) medical model of life and death. An example of this conflict occurs in the stark contradiction of doctor-characters in *Mama Day* and in *Meridian*. In the first case the doctor is part of the collective life of the community and engaged with

⁹⁵ Rachael Blau DuPlessis, *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1985.

⁹⁶ Virginia Fowler, *Gloria Naylor: In Search of Sanctuary*, New York: Twayne, 1996.

the ways that individual health hinges on interpersonal relationships. In the second, ‘the doctor’ is figured as in the tradition of ‘veterinarians’ called on by whites to manage black health. The ‘doctor’ is a suspect and problematic figure in 20th century African American literature. Imbued with both respect because of his ability to heal, as well as a potential to harm because of his position, the character of the doctor is written with ambivalence. Alice Walker’s 1976 novel *Meridian*, and Gloria Naylor’s 1988 *Mama Day* describe the life stories, occupational pursuits, love interests, and political participation in post-Civil Rights era life of a young black women. Ophelia and Meridian experience disease as a function of their psychosocial context, and cope with individual and collective dis-ease through the supportive and empathic presence of beloved community who assume co-responsibility for managing the terminal dissolution and decline associated with the passage of time. Recovery from the history of trauma, whether enslavement and the aftermath on Willow Springs, or racial oppression in the Jim Crow South, demands that both women abide in a permanent dis-ease, while also letting go of the self-focused individual pain of loss associated with their respective histories.

These novel’s treatment of community dis-ease as embodied in women raises questions of complicity in self-neglect and prioritization of self-care.⁹⁷ Dominant representations of disease suffered by individuals from ‘racially’ stigmatized collective bodies have historically reversed the causality of suffering, blaming victims of socio-economic oppression for epidemics associated with resource scarcity, and attributing risk of contagion as a threat perpetrated by communities of color on the white U.S. national

⁹⁷ Andrews, Larry R. “Black Sisterhood in Naylor’s Novels.” *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993. 285-302.

body.⁹⁸ Clearly, neither novel burdens the sufferer of dis-ease with condemnation, yet both novels do emphasize the power of self-perception and the character's own choices in shaping outcomes. A dominant theme evidenced in the evolution of dis-eased subjectivity is that of self-blame; however, in neither novel is the heroine empowered by 'owning' contributory actions or cognitions to her condition -- nor are they cured of the historically given and inescapable prognosis of hereditary and environmental pain associated with 'racial' morbidity in the U.S. South. Each novel conveys the hope that racial and gender inequity of pain management resources for chronic disease are remediable, despite the continuing presence of social and personal pathology.⁹⁹ Straight-forward strategies for improved efficacy in treating collective and individual disease are absent from the narratives presented by Walker and Naylor, yet both authors tell stories wherein racial and gender disparities in health and morbidity intersect with 'racial uplift' social prescriptions for black community recovery in a manner that is disadvantageous to each heroine.¹⁰⁰ These heroines struggle toward educational and professional success, as well as romantic and intimate relationships within the space of a beloved community afflicted by recurrent and progressive bouts of pathological social symptoms, followed by remission and renewed homeostasis, though never 'cure.' Walker and Naylor argue the black feminist position that 'healing' is a cognitive process rather than a future historical event to anticipate. Time and history don't hold the prospect of recovery, only the

⁹⁸ Sheldon Watts, *Epidemics and History: Disease, Power and Imperialism*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1997.

⁹⁹ Norman B. Anderson, Randy A. Bulatao, and Barney Cohen, eds., *Critical Perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Differences in Health in Late Life*, Panel on Race, Ethnicity, and Health in Later Life, Committee on Population, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, D.C. : National Academies Press, 2004.

¹⁰⁰ Joanne M. Martin, Elmer P. Martin, *The Helping Tradition in the Black Family and Community*, Silver Spring, Md. : National Association of Social Workers, 1985. Sadye L. Logan, ed., *The Black Family : Strengths, Self-help, and Positive Change*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996.

promise of inevitable dissolution to be gracefully managed with as much dignity as possible.¹⁰¹

In *Meridian* and *Mama Day*, the individual body is nested in the collective body, subjects are saturated in the health of their social ecology, and one's social ecology is imbricated with the wellness of the individual. Walker and Naylor reflect on the black women's cognitive and cultural management of symptoms associated with progressive, chronic and degenerative dis-ease course in their respective tales of resiliently dis-eased heroines. These two stories of bodily dis-ease, whether in the individual or collective corpus, are offered by the author's as literary palliation for suffering -- each novel includes a philosophical prescription on symptom management in the face of chronic pain and disease. Walker and Naylor argue through the demonstration of their heroine's disease management that the health of the individual and collective body necessarily involves deterioration, transition, and some dis-ease, yet suffering can be minimized and symptoms controlled when resignation, denial, and isolation are substituted by social acknowledgment and information accuracy in patient-provider, or community-practitioner, communication -- especially in the form of deathart.

This chapter's title is taken from a poem entitled 'My Grandfather Wouldn't Know Me If He Saw Me,' by Délana R.A. Dameron, from her South Carolina Poetry Book Prize winning collection *How God Ends Us* (2009).

¹⁰¹ Carroll, Rebecca. "Interview: Gloria Naylor." *I Know What the Red Clay Looks Like: The Voice and Vision of Black Women Writers*. New York: Crown, 1994. 158-73.

CHAPTER 4

“GOING HARD, GOING EASY, GOING HOME”: THE DEATHBED IN JOHN WIDEMAN’S *HIDING PLACE* & ERNEST GAINES’ *A LESSON BEFORE DYING*

“Life’s hard. Didn’t nobody never tell you? Didn’t nobody never hold you up and look in your eyes and tell you you got to die one day little boy and they be plenty days you wisht it be sooner stead of later? Didn’t nobody never tell you that? Feel sorry for you if you a grown man and nobody ain’t told you that...Listen at you. Listen at this poor child. The day you die is the day you stop running. And not one second sooner. You mize well go on back to that shed and start to dreaming again...Look you. Don’t be telling me about your rather this and your rather that...I came up on this hill to die. Brought everything needed with me. And this place up here is a graveyard full up with rathers. Brought everything I need. Not everything I want. Didn’t say that. Said everything I need. What I want is buried in the cold ground. That’s where my rathers is and that’s where they gon stay till I get down there with them. Then I have all my rathers. So don’t be telling me what you would if you could. Knew you was out there in the shed. Where else you gon be? Ain’t no other way it could be. So here you is and here I is and that’s that. So hush about rather drink your coffee.”

--Mother Bess, *Hiding Place: The Homewood Trilogy*, 83-95.

“Public defender, trying to get him off, called him a dumb animal...he said it would be like tying a hog down into that chair and executing him -- an animal that didn’t know what any of it was all about. The jury, twelve white men good and true, still sentenced him to death. Now his godmother wants me to visit him and make him know -- prove to these white men -- that he’s not a hog, that he’s a man. I’m supposed to make him a man. Who am I? God? I still don’t know if the sheriff will even let me visit him. And suppose he did; what then? What do I say to him? Do I know what a man is? Do I know how a man is supposed to die? I’m still trying to find out how a man should live. Am I supposed to tell someone how to die who has never lived?...Suppose I was allowed to visit him, and suppose I reached him and made him realize that he was as much a man as any other man; then what? He’s still going to die. The next day, the next week, the next month. So what will I have accomplished? What will I have done? Why not let the hog die without knowing anything?”

--Professor, *A Lesson Before Dying*, 31

The Passage Between Life and Death

These two opening epigraphs document representations of the deathbed, a prominent trope in 20th century African American fiction. Excerpted from *Hiding Place* (1981) by John Edgar Wideman, and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) by Ernest J. Gaines, these passages voice the perspective of attendants, or witnesses, at the deathbed of young black men. The speaker in the first epigraph is an elderly black woman with unresolved grief over the death of her only son forty years prior awaiting death from the progression of age-related multi-system organ failure. She speaks to her sister's great grandson who has come to her 'hiding place' or isolated deathbed for refuge and advice from a police manhunt that will end in his imprisonment or execution. In the second epigraph the speaker is a frustrated primary school teacher in a small black community located on a former plantation who is the unwilling witness to the prison deathbed of a childhood friend awaiting execution. Taken together, the lesson before dying that one can draw from the deathbed ritual of these novels, is that there is no hiding place from death, hence, dying is the ultimate test of any individual's ability to cope with radical identity change transformation in relation to community identity. The recursive loop of identification between the living and 'the dead' in memorial is established in the linear transit of the precedent on their deathbed. The quality of the deathbed as a space and as a temporal event is a litmus test of individual and collective integrity and commitment to humanism.

The 'hiding place' at the top of Bruston Hill, a summit in the suburban hills of Homewood, a black community of Pittsburgh, is the ancestral ground of the extended Owens-Lawson-French-Hollinger clan. In a tense conversation about assisted living choices for 'Mother Bess,' (the eldest surviving member of the large and

intergenerational family), a younger family member insists that Bess be lodged with a responsible family member instead of returning to the Hill to live in the burned-out ruins of the big house where clan matriarch and escaped slave Sybela Owen's had reared her dozens of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Another family member reminds all that Bruston Hill "Belongs to all of us. And always will" (30). Bess decides to retire to the shack on the hill in disgust and rejection of her community for the manner in which they have disrespected her deathbed wish to die on the Hill. She prefers an isolated deathbed because she is experiencing unresolved grief and complicated bereavement over the death of her only son Eugene in WWII. Bess chooses to make deathbed solitary in an embittered refusal of family assistance, angry that "they talked like she was dead already. Or like she was a child, or like she just wasn't there in the room with ears and breath like the rest of them," a common failure of language about end-of-life care choices (29). The family debates, with one person noting that the shack is more "like a doghouse than someplace for a human being," but Bess, "wants to visit. It was here home, after all. Some of us were born there too" (29). Bess does move back to the Hill and lives independently with the ghosts of her dead husband, and her great great great grand-niece who died of congenital degenerative neurological condition in the first year of life. The dead baby ghost pleasantly haunts Bess, yet the funeral for the dead child is the last social event for which Bess chooses to leave her deathbed and rejoin community life. She entertains the occasional visitors, younger family members who come to ask her for stories, advice, and blessings because of her reputation as powerful, even if 'evil' and 'crazy' matriarch. Family tell her "you need to come down off that hill, I bet half those aches and pains would go away if you come down off that hills" but Bess

is committed to dying independently despite advanced adult decline. She is embittered and lonely however, and dreams frequently about the family, but after a number of years thinks, “I wear this house like Sybela Owens always wore her black cape like they always gon be saying *come down* and I’m always gon be Bess and nothing else” (32). Bess has a conflicted relationship with her family in that they call her ‘Mother Bess’ - an attribution that enrages her because of her unresolved grief over having lost her son Eugene in World War II. It is not until the end of the novel when she feels called to bear witness at the death of Tommy, her “long dead sister’s great grandson,” that she does decide to come down off the Hill and return to collective social life (44).

At the opening of the novel Bess’s great grand-nephew Tommy seeks refuge from a vigilante hunt on Bruston Hill after climbing a water tower that is figured as a mysterious vessel. The description of the water tower intertextually references Sybela Owens, the family founding matriarch, as well as the collective identity of the Homewood community. “The water tower was grey and rusty. Nobody could tell him how much it held, or why it was there,” implying that the water tower represents more than its utilitarian function for Tommy (88). “Even now, even grown he hesitated at the edge of its shadow. A lack shape which would soon be swallowed in the deeper blackness fallin on Bruston Hill. That’s all it was, etched there momentarily in the failing light. But he retreated, he stared and then backed off,” Tommy’s encounter with the dark and mysterious vessel whose shape is indeterminate, contents ambiguous, purpose unclear, is spooky -- he feels an uncanny slip in his perception of reality (88). He is under enormous stress, fatigued, afraid for his life, on the run, but he desperately seeks respite. The dark shape he sees at the top of Bruston Hill resonates with the dark shape of the ancestor

Sybela in her black cape; family in that space frequently report 'seeing' her or imagine her presence richly. "If anything could have started him up ...it would be those questions he asked a long time ago. Nobody had answered them then. Nobody since. You'd have to get up there and see for yourself. You'd have to get up high enough to lift the lid and peek over the edge. The tower was the only thing taller than the trees at the back of her [Bess/Sybela] yard, the trees he used for guiding his steps back where he'd come from" (88) Return to the ancestral home is typical in African American death ritual, however, it is usually represented as happening post-mortem. Tommy is facing death at the hands of a contemporary vigilante mob, the Pittsburgh police. He intuitively understands that visiting Bruston Hill will be deathbed preparation -- a ritual 'return' to "where he'd come from" for the purpose of communion with the transcendent identity of his family collective, both living and dead. The novel alternates between the narrative voices of a third person narrator, Tommy, Bess, and a neighborhood boy named Clement. The story moves from Tommy's arrival on the Hill, through Bess and his philosophical debates about the purpose of life given the fact of death -- each reflects on the other's deathbed circumstance -- and culminates in the final scenes where Tommy decides to seek redemption in the collective life of Homewood despite the near certainty of death, and Bess raises from her deathbed upon Tommy's murder to testify about his deathbed wish that he be remembered as courageous.

His eventual murder by the police motivates Bess's decision to burn down the shack, and return to the collective for the cause of social justice on behalf of the dead Tommy. After hearing the sound of sirens, running feet, then gunfire followed by silence she thinks, "somebody has to go down there and tell the truth. Lizabeth's boy didn't kill

nobody. He wasn't scared. All he needed was another chance and somebody needs to go down there and tell them. And she was going to do just that. Burn down that last bit of shack on Bruston Hill and tell them what they needed to know," in order that Tommy's deathbed confessions be dignified by community recognition (158). Upon realization that Tommy has been murdered by the police, Bess feels compelled to honor his deathbed revelations through public testimonial, "that he ain't killed nobody. That he needed one more chance. That he staked his life on one more chance" (158). Marshalling her emotional and physical resources, she wills herself from the deathbed on Bruston Hill and begins to make her way down to the community and out of the exilic space of near death subjectivity with the ghostly assistance of her dead husband and the spectral presence of a dead baby girl whose funeral was the last social event that Bess attended before retiring to the isolation of her deathbed. Her conviction that, "They should know all that down there. She'll tell them. She'll make sure they hear. Yes indeed," is driven by her desire to honor the last wishes and words of her sister's grandson. Finally, Tommy's passage from life to death, and his courageous disposition in facing death at the end with dignity, represent the opportunity for Bess to rejoin the life of her family and broader community with the rhetorical warrant that only death provides. She loses no face in changing her mind and 'coming down' off the Hill because of the necessity that she fulfill her ritual obligation as a deathbed witness --- so, in effect, Tommy's death motivates the remission of symptoms in Bess.

Speaking in the name of the dead on behalf of the living for the purposes of justice is a rhetorical deathart that is honored and respected in African American culture, and this tradition exemplified in *A Hiding Place* and *A Lesson Before Dying*. Bess utilizes

the living memory of her dead husband to help her physically begin the journey down the mountain, “On her man’s arms now, four good legs now and she’s coming. She’s coming to tell them he aint’ scared no more and they better listen and they better make sure it don’t happen so easy ever again”(158). Bess’ desire to speak out about the injustice of Tommy’s extrajudicial execution, a type of contemporary lynching, is a death ritual called making *novena*, the offering of lament and honorific remembrance performed in the immediate period after death, a time when family and friends offer prayer in the name of the dead with the hope of a redeemed future. The deathbed thanatope explored in this chapter has specific features that resonate in African American deathart because of the history of racial oppression: the coming death is unnatural, the precedent has foreknowledge that they will be executed by state sanctioned violence, the location is not a bed but a space of captivity or flight, the deathbed attendants are politically traumatized, the community of witnesses shape the quality of the precedent’s dying by offering supportive affirmation, the quality of the precedent’s death journey bears on the status of the collective, and the surviving witnesses are tasked with memorializing the deathbed identity and performance of the person once deceased, into a heroic ancestor.

This chapter’s argument is first, the deathbed is a textually and socially heavy trope in African American representational practices. Changes in the regime of U.S. racial oppression and disenfranchisement are detectable by shifts in how individuals, societies and community treat the dying. Mourning the dying and death of other human beings is a natural aspect of human sociality because of the attachment systems that we are born with as mammals. These basic attachment systems are become sophisticated and metaphysical in cultural representations of death and dying, and, as in these two novels,

anticipatory grief as well as posthumous mourning attachments are not extinguished by death. Instead, attachments can become enhanced by the imagined presence of the decedents as ancestors and actors in the ongoing politics of community life. Secondly, this chapter implies that the deathbed is a grotesque, or hidden, space where relationships between the living and their larger community are negotiated and consolidated. Thirdly,, this argument presumes that the deathbed is a social barometer of collective health and the collective's capacity to ritually process the dis-integration endemic to human culture and physicality. Lastly, the deathbed thanatope is a critical measure of cultural belief in the idea of return, home-going, repatriation, *aliyah* out of exile, reunion with the One. Mourning is an especially crucial attribute of successful deathbed send-offs in the scenes read from *A Lesson Before Dying* and *Homewood Trilogy*. Black national identity, and the imagined homeland to which the precedent is headed, are constructed on the crucible of ritual mourning in African American cultural history. Legible deathbed rituals for both the precedent and their attendants, for instance, is of significant importance in 20th-century African American creative fiction because it operates inter-textually and extra-textually to solidify 'racial' identification, allegiance, and affiliation within the imagined community of readers. An 'Us' -- the 'We' -- is never more consolidated and circumscribed than in the cultural recognition of who is, and who is not, amongst the legitimate mourners. This chapter shows that in spite of deep opposition to deathbed politics experienced, for example, by Gaines' character Grant, community members converge in their beliefs that the deathbed journey is a marker of collective values.

The novel *A Lesson While Dying* (1993) by Ernest J. Gaines is a neo-slave narrative, set on a post WWII former plantation in the 'quarters' community. The story is

about the relationship between two men, Grant a school teacher and Jefferson an imprisoned day laborer from the same small tightly-knit black community, and their performance of deathbed ritual and preparatory work so that Jefferson's final steps on the journey to death are dignified. The prison cell as deathbed is weighty in the history of African American experience, but the incarcerated deathbed is also an ubiquitous representation in European deathart. Beginning with a decision to fulfill the wishes of elder women in his community, Grant embarks on a mission to humanize the dying Jefferson through empathic deathbed presence using the tools of interpersonal dialogue, mutual recognition, and reflective mirroring of positive affirmation. The therapeutic intervention treats Jefferson's comorbidity, the disease of self-incoherence, the underlying terminal condition from which Jefferson suffers is the non-negotiable death-sentence given by the State. In Chapter Two's argument that self-coherence as an asset in allowing for the greater health of the individual, we explored the comorbidity of self-incoherence and primary disease. In *Mama Day*, Cocoa/Ophelia experienced a nearly terminal disease complicated by her inability to secure psychosocial support from her community because of identity issues, specifically fissures in continuity of self across cosmologic frameworks. Secularized narratives on the meaning of the birth → death → life cycle conflict with the eschatology shaped by the confluence of African-derived cosmologies filtered and recalibrated to flow through the aperture of enslavement-related morbidity in *Mama Day*, likewise *A Lesson*. Gradations of emphasis on the present participation of 'the dead' and purpose of 'the dead' in African American fiction explore these two cosmological frameworks represented in deathart and ritual practice. In the story of Jefferson and Grant's relationship, (that of precedent and deathbed attendant),

sacralized language and deathart (including culinary art) work to ease the pain and anxiety of the death for the individual and entire community. As the story progresses, Grant's deathbed attendance to the prison where Jefferson awaits his execution is humanizing to Grant himself. Grant gains inspiration from Jefferson's integrity and strength in managing death anxiety. On behalf of the living, Jefferson trains to die with dignity so as to protect his community of survivors from the grief and humiliation of bearing witness to the abject and pathetic murder of a community son. Grant and George labor in defiance of racial violence's power to degrade black humanity through death-threats and desecration. Gaines story of two men struggling to fulfill the hope of their elders represents the deathbed as a place of contested opportunity: death need not be wasted but can be rendered into a resource for community empowerment. Jefferson's death by racial violence is potentially more injurious to his survivors if aggravated by the 'salt-in-the-wound' of an ignoble spectacle reminiscent of lynching. Jefferson's courage in facing his unjust death sentence denies the ritual racial hubris of public execution the quality of macabre spectacle. Rather, whites with conscience feel shame and embarrassment at the execution, as Jefferson processes to the chair with composure.

The history of black death, and the thanatope of the deathbed in 20th century African American creative writing argue that dying is often understood as taking place in the context of low-grade, unannounced 'racial' warfare against African Americans. Lynching and public execution turn the deathbed into an instrument of oppression. The psychology of 'execution' as mass deathart has ancient patrimony. Additionally, the most popular genre of deathart is the very public practice of war. War can be understood as a deathart *par excellence*: aesthetics, ritual observations, symbolism, metaphors, mass

public art performance, war is. The invocation of Yoda is appropriate: *Star Wars* is one of the most consumed war stories of the 20th century because of the strong narrative arc and character development on the deathbed. Non-fictional war is achieved only ever by the execution of rituals to initiate conflict, from rhetorical invective, justifications, jeremiads, novenas, eulogy, and elegy, to the historically received rituals of allegiance and affiliation in 'racial' collectives. War is always sophisticated in narrative structure (origin, reason, cause, characters, plot tension, pathos), accompanied by micro and macro accounts of the deathbed.

Gaines has a relationship to war as a source of dislocation in black life. He also has an autobiographical identification with the crib and grave of African American identity: the U.S. South. The novel opens with Grant's description of his attendance to Jefferson's deathbed in the final moments before his death. He says, "I was not there, yet I was there"(1). The shape of signification and the experience denoted in this expression are similar to the passage from life to death. *A Lesson Before Dying* has a plot that runs over several months in on the post-slavery plantation turned sharecropper community in late 20th century Louisiana. The ritual observation of racial etiquette is deadening, and a form of aggressive social pathology. Defending against the social performance of degraded humanity is an artistic practice, a discursive refinement. Grant struggles with the burden of constant 'racial' performance. He laments his responsibility to provide social support and self-coherence through mutual recognition for Jefferson, denouncing his relationship with Jefferson to his girlfriend Vivian, questioning the deathbed obligation, "Commitment to what -- to live and die in this hellhole, when we can leave and live like other people? ...I need to be someplace where I can feel I'm living,...I don't

want to spend the rest of my life teaching school in a plantation church....I don't feel alive here. I'm not living here"(29). This expression recalls Chapter One's discussion of living-death and death-bound identity. Jefferson and Grant demonstrate the antinodal points of identity described in Chapter One's formulation of black masculinity; Jefferson is without ego, "a hog" waiting to die, and Grant is a revenant, an undead man who tearfully reveals to Jefferson the death anxiety he experiences as a black man with an intact ego on the plantation. "I want to run away, but go where and do what? I'm needed here and I know it, but I feel that all I'm doing here is choking myself" (193). He tries to imbue Jefferson with the ability to consolidate an ego on his deathbed, instructing him, "Do you know what a myth is Jefferson?...A myth is an old lie that people believe in. White people believe that they're better than anyone else on earth -- and that's a myth. The last thing they ever want is to see a black man stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all....Their forefathers said that we're only three-fifths human -- and they believe it to this day...I want you to chip away at that myth by standing...I want you -- yes, you --- to call them liars. I want you to show them that you are as much a man -- more a man than they can ever be...I need you...we need you" (193). Wanting to run, feeling obligated to remain, being unable to move, heading toward death, living under the shadow of racial violence -- these emotions grate against Grant's health. It is not only Grant who needs Jefferson, but the entire community's health depends on Jefferson's capacity to conduct his death in defiance of the psychological warfare of public execution.

When Jefferson's Aunt Emma asks Grant to help Jefferson die with dignity, she justifies her demand based on her conviction that her own coming age-related death is

sufficient warrant, a deathbed wish that must be honored. She asks Grant to help, “Cause somebody go’n do something ‘fore I die” (123). The expectation that deathbed wishes will be honored is an ideal with so much social gravity that it even functions inter-racially to bind whites into relations of mutual recognition. This becomes an especially heavy point of representation in African American literature and life, when access to the deathbed is denied or abrogated. For example, Ms. Emma stands at the back door of the home where she has been a domestic servant for half a century and says of Jefferson, “I’m not begging for his life no more; that’s over. I just want see him die like a man. This family owe me that much, Mr. Henri. And I want it. I want somebody do something for me one time fore I close my eyes. Somebody got do something for me one time ‘fore I close my eyes, Mr. Henri. Please, sir,” and despite the hesitation and anger of the white Henri Pichot, a figure in the white power establishment, about having been asked to intervene on Jefferson’s behalf so that Grant can engage in the practice of deathbed attendance, ‘Mr. Henri’ reluctantly agrees to request because of the kairotic force of ‘last wishes.’ Both ‘the dead’ and the dying command audience attention premised on their distinct identity in relationship to the living. Toward the end of the novel, an older Grant retrospects on his own evolution as a deathartisan. “I began to listen, to listen closely to how they talked about their heroes, how they talked about the dead and about how great the dead hand once been. I heart it everywhere”(90). The dead function as shared community for the living, help to facilitate the grounds for survivor bonding, celebratory remembrance, and memorial tribute. The dying are ambassadors from the living to the dead, as such their last wishes are respected as weighty. The dying are also representatives of the living whose ascendance to the status of ancestor, and thus

instantiation as a cultural resource for heroic storytelling, requires that the passage be dignified.

Lynching is a horrific violence not only because the victim dies, but because their death is ignoble and the corpse is desecrated, thus alienating the victim from becoming part of ongoing community life as an honored ancestor. Lynching also deprives the community of the posthumous identity of the victim as a resource in imagining the collective body as inheritors of an honorable tradition. In both *Hiding Place* and *A Lesson Before Dying*, the ‘deathbed’ is the waiting space before the characters of Tommy and Jefferson face execution. The death penalty, imprisonment, and police killings of black men, are features of the deathbed thanatope specific to the African American experience in the 20th century that are historically tied to Lynch-Law and racial violence. The continuity between Jim Crow immobility and lynch-law, and contemporary prison-industrial-complex related immobility and death is a thick area of interdisciplinary scholarship. The deathbed in both of these novels is configured through the specific history of the encounter between black men and death given by the linkages between lynch-law and capital punishment. Indeed, the theme of ‘running’ is recurrent in both novels; ‘running’ represents escape, forced exile, as the necessary action of a ‘moving target,’ as a mode of ‘racial’ life. Indeed, the constant pressure of being ‘on-the-move’ in discourse, to preserve identity, to change identity, to survive the racially oppressive prerogatives of dominant culture that prefer black bodies be ‘locked down’ creates conditions of chronic stress that are implicated in higher incidence of morbidity in African Americans. Yet, ‘running’ as a metaphor for being alive has positive connotations in African American literature, too. The choice between the deathbed of

immobility and the life of 'running' is not a viable choice for individual or community health, yet it is the one that these two novels represent as available to people living under the sign of 'blackness' in U.S. society.

Literary critic Karla Holloway in her analysis of black death begins with the story of her son's murder as he attempted escape from prison, and the grief and anguish of her family as they are forced to come to terms with the public extra-judicial execution of their boy. In processing her son's deathbed scene -- a field outside a maximum security prison in North Carolina, Holloway shares that, "all we wanted to know was whether or not our child's final moments were as anguished as his life -- whether or not his was a lingering and knowing death" (9). Holloway explains the deathbed thanatope thusly, "The anticipation of death and dying figured into the experiences of black folk so persistently, given how much more omnipresent death was for them than for other Americans, that lamentation and mortification both found their way into public and private representations of African America to an astonishing degree. The twentieth century's literature and film, its visual arts and music,...consistently called up a passed-on narrative," Holloway uses the phrase 'passed-on' to include narratives of pre and post-mortem representation (6). "Black culture's stories of death and dying were inextricably linked to the ways in which the nation experienced, perceived, and represented African America," and these representations have obsessively figured African American's as dangerous, diseased, and undeserving of death with dignity. "The twentieth century rehearsed, nearly to perfection, a relentless cycle of cultural memory and black mourning. Black deaths and black dying have cut across and through decades and centuries as if neither one matters more than the incoherent, associative presence of the other. Even if

the story is grief-stricken, the act of memorializing retains a particular aspect of a culture's narrative, and for blacks in the Americas, some notion of racial memory and racial realization is mediated through the veil of death," and passage through the veil, or membrane of death is a constitutive aspect of individual and collective identity for Wideman and Gains. Remarking on the author of *Hiding Place*, Holloway writes, "John Wideman mournfully acknowledged that one way of understanding African America is to articulate the way that it has meant that 'black lives are expendable, can disappear, click, just like that,'" yet Wideman also offers the potential that the black deathbed holds out for staging resistance to racial violence (7-8). Of Gaines, Holloway notes that, "Early in *A Lesson*, Gaines made clear its task to reclaim the human spirit that the courts had erased. The novel's task was not to save Jefferson from the execution imposed by a racist justice system but to save his personhood. As Jefferson faced execution, he wrote to his teacher: 'good by mr wiggan tell them im strong tell them im a man,'" (80). This sentiment and desire to remain coherent and intact on the deathbed is not unique to individuals about to be executed, but is also expressed by those whose deathbed is consequent of chronic disease. Jefferson deathbed instruction is that he be remembered as 'a strong man,' as a dignified human being who faced his death with courage and intention -- Bess in *Hiding Place* attempts to fulfill a similar deathbed wish for Tommy by sharing that he was 'unafraid' to face his death.

Hiding Place is part of a trilogy entitled *Homewood* that tells the story of author Wideman's interconnected family, of their struggles, social routines, conflicting philosophies, and collective negotiation of life transition. The character 'Mother Bess' is the eldest surviving member of the family, and she decides to establish her deathbed at the

origin point of the large, extended family founded by an escaped slave named Sybela Owens -- a woman who convinced her enslavers son to 'steal' her to Pittsburgh so that they could be together. The plot moves from the arrival of Tommy to, a 25 year old unemployed hustler estranged from wife Sarah and 7-year old son, at Bruston Hill, to a series of conversations in the course of several days had over food and drink between Tommy and Bess wherein the family history, collected stories, and generally philosophy of life and death are shared, to the decision by Tommy to face the police, his eventual murder while on the run, to Bess' descent from the Hill to the world of the living for the purpose of offering testimonial on behalf of the dead.

Mother Bess is the eldest surviving member of the family, and she herself is dying of geriatric decline. In her deathbed tutorial for Tommy, her great grand nephew, she offers a philosophical examination of the passage between life and death, the radical shift whereby one can 'stop running.' Tommy has roughly appealed to his great aunt for refuge; hunted by the police for involvement in an armed robbery turned homicide, Tommy is disoriented by substance abuse and fatigue. When at first he is refused sanctuary inside the small, dilapidated, burned-out, one room shack on at the top of Bruston Hill in the fictional Northern post-industrial black community of Homewood, Tommy is indignant. But, Mother Bess contradicts Tommy's appeal. Bess' advice to Tommy is metaphorically flexible and elegant, though she later reneges on her fatalism and encourages Tommy to remain in the hiding place to avoid hastening his death. Initially, Bess argues (1) *life is hard*, (2) *where else you gon be* [but in life]? and, (3) *So here you is and here I is and that's that*. For several days Tommy hides-out from the manhunt in the ramshackle burned out buildings at the top of Bruston Hill in the ancestral

family space, where his great great Aunt Bess is awaiting her death in bitterness and isolation -- her only son Eugene long dead and her husband gone, she purposefully segregates herself from the perceived pain and futility of black social life. Over the course of several days, Tommy and Mother Bess shape each other through story-telling, intergenerational reflection on the meaning of death, plant a garden, enjoy libations, and talk about the dead. The reader learns from their conversations that Tommy fears profoundly for his sense-of-self-coherence, he feels an absence of social support, and he has cynicism about spirituality. At the same time, Tommy is resilient and has the potential for evolution and spiritual growth. After his first night on Bruston Hill Tommy awakes and thinks,

“My Lord, what a morning...They want him dead. They want to kill him but he made it through the night. A thousand years of night. Haze was lifting, the sun rising behind him. Standing under the trees behind the shack of Mother Bess, a crazy, half-dead, mean old lady and he ain’t got a dime in his pocket and the city a percolating vat of lye below him and every cop in Pittsburgh on his tail and he’s twenty-five years old and nothing, no good just like they been telling him all the days of his life, but he is smiling, smiling maybe for the first time in his life at this own silly smile, at the top of Bruston Hill, at the silly morning being a morning here, being morning here like it’s always morning someplace in the world for no good reason. Just morning, yes. Just morning. And I’m here. One more time.

Yes,”

this present-minded focus on the nature of human life, time and gratitude is revelatory of the potential that the character has to develop a deeper relationship to himself and his

community because of his status as ‘about to die,’ -- death is a catalyst for Tommy’s contemplation on the value of time and his own resilience.

“FOR MORT, ELISE, AND TAKAJO / *special spirits...special place*,” opens the 1981 novel *Hiding Place*. This dedication to the dead features an ellipse, a textual passage that mirrors the passage between life and death experienced on the deathbed. An *ellipses* (ἔλλειψις) is a smooth bounded curve, an ancient mathematical idea and literary tool. In literary orthography the ‘...’ signifies the absence of a presence, and the presence of an absence. The distance textual chasm between the antinodal points (special place <---> special place) is an ambiguous interval, like the distance between life and death. This shape of the ellipse’s signification is chiasmic in structure; the absence of presence and the presence of absence. We understand something is missing, but the something missing cannot be understood. Perhaps *Hiding Place*, an extended exploration of the deathbed thanatope, opens with this elliptical eulogic dedication because ellipses are allegorical of the deathbed, or the deathbed is allegorical of ellipses. The story of Mother Bess and her great nephew Tommy engaged in a lethal argument about the nature of life and liberty, and death with dignity, uses the thanatope of the deathbed. The event, space, occasion, journey, distance, shape, definition, function, effect, purpose, location, life, plot, orbit, axes, gears, index, and distribution of the ellipse is indefinite in language, unlike the class of mathematical objects. We enjoy no finality or certain formulation of the discursive object that lives between *spirits* and *special* in this opening line of a story about the shared deathbed of Tommy and Mother Bess, a fugitive father suffering alienation from family while hunted by police, and an embittered elder ambivalent-matriarch death-

spiraling in adult decline from environmental insult and social isolation. The author of the novel, Faulkner Award-winning John Edgar Wideman opens with an invocation of his dead (Mort, Elise and Takajo), and a memorial tribute to the broader collective of 'the dead' identified with his imagined ancestral 'home' of allegiance (special place). Secondly, an 'Afro-American Spiritual' is epigraphically offered, which reads, *Went to the Rock to hide my face/Rock cried out, No hiding place*. Wideman eulogizes the town of Homewood, engages in signifying deathart in the entitlement of the novel in the tradition of the referenced Spiritual. The deathbed lesson and soteriology (σωτηρία), or salvation discourse, of Wideman's extended contemplation and argument in *Hiding Place* is that one can 'hide' from life, but not from death. The outcome in either case is less than dignified, according to his estimation.

What happens in the ellipse between life and death is is is this Deathbeds are sites of social gravity, locations of grotesque passage, places of entropic departure, and topoi of home-going. The definition of a 'good death' is one that emerges from cultural and spiritual values, and is used to measure the quality of the precedent's passing into the afterlife. *Ars moriendi*, or the art of dying, is a practice and concept that occurs in formal prescription as well as folk expressions in all cultures. In African American 20th century literary tradition, *ars moriendi* is described in great detail; examples of deaths along the continuum from 'soft,' to going 'hard,' to going 'home,' -- the imagined afterlife wherein one joins with ancestors and comes into union with a transcendent and unifying presence -- are offered in almost every novel published in the 20th century by African American writers. The weight, pull, attraction and momentum of relationships spiralling around the site of dying give rise to the phenomenon of palliation -- a relief from pain, suffering and

distress. Presence of the beloved community around the *precedent*, who is to die, (a figure refracted also through the other definitions of the term, an authority, a rule, a measure), creates the conditions for dignity to prevail in the relative field of social power associated with 'race.' Passing as an existential and aesthetic experience occurs in locations, characterized by grotesque features of hybridity, metamorphosis, and doubleness; inducing both empathy and disgust in both the precedent and their deathbed entourage. Entropic life trajectory-- the random variability that tends toward disorder as a rule of African American life -- is most prominent in the mode of departure, a compression of all historical trace into the critical probability that black life will tend toward lethal and seemingly random dis-integration on the way 'out.' The quality of departure, and the physical and psychosocial forces that move a body on the deathbed toward systemic closure, are random while at the same time probabilistic in placing the precedent in circumstance of radical instability.

The questioning, invective, and epideictic rhetoric of the opening epigraphs showcases the thanatologic thinking of Earnest Gaines and John Edgar Wideman, two black male authors writing in the post WWII period. They assess how humanity has dealt with death, and what the implications of the deathbed experience are from the perspective of community and individual spirituality. These novelistic explorations of life's meaning, mortality, identity and cultural change at one of the most crucial of the life cycles - death, make mutually reinforcing arguments about the necessity that a good death be one that the precedent actively engages, even under conditions of coercion and ultimatum.

Wideman's *Homewood Trilogy*, the collection to which *Hiding Place* contributes explores the generational frictions, religious divides, family disputes, community

conflicts and individual strife that typify African American life in a de-industrializing Northern town experiencing intensified socio-economic stratification. Interestingly, even amid these deep community divides, deathbed philosophy and practices converge in the lives of characters from extremely divergent life circumstances. This convergence is surprising because of the ways that Gaines also represents late 20th century black community in Homewood as experiencing divergent spiritual and worship styles related to differences in class, generational and gender identity. For example, the younger generation of Homewood's black community engage in fewer radical and heroic displays of defiance against 'racial' oppression in the name of dignified death than their elders. Fear of death in the younger generation is more pronounced, even as premature death by endemic violence related to participation in the illicit economy of drug-trade gives rise to a constant state of mourning due to high morbidity. The generational tension, and the implied tension between the living and the dead are treated as preparatory challenges that actually strengthen and grow the capacity of individuals to deal with dying and death in a productive and identity consolidating fashion. One may expect to find that the deathbed is inflexible as a rhetorical site, that ritual demand and tradition would make the location of dying semi-rigid in terms of permissible discourse, and to some degree this is true. Yet, the thanatope of the deathbed works in both novels to offer grounds for dissidence and consolidation of African American identity. It is the place for affirmation of spiritual expectations and prophecy, as well as the moment of opportunity for questioning the conditions of in/justice and the possibility for resistance to historically given identity. Whether deathbed liturgy is the utter silence of the walk between cell and executioner's chair, or the sounds of "guns popping like firecrackers and the sirens and the big voice in

a bull-horn like on TV” (97), it is evocative of an attachment response to one’s own identity, sense of self, and community of historical allegiance. Cultural critic and thanatologist Charlton D. McIlwain has noted “among all the forms of experience that occur in any given culture, society, or community, death is the one experience that transcends them all” (1). McIlwain’s claim about the universal presence of death across cultural contexts is followed up by his powerful study of the specific context of black funerary ritual in the U.S. Evidence seems to suggest that aspects of African spiritualities, various views regarding the dead, and specific funerary practices can be seen in African-American communities from the period of slavery through the present (31). R-eoccurring thanatic rhetorics, such as elegy, epideictic, satire, and eulogy help us to understand the objectives of Wideman and Gaines in offering these novels as deathart. Inventory of death scenes in African American fiction reveals common features of death ritual, including the doctor-patient (iatric) encounter, aesthetic modes of palliation prior to death, community concern with the quality of transcendence, the offering of burial gifts for the decedent, and African influenced styles of funerary observance.

Soteriologic Rhetoric: Escape, Transcendence and Salvation as Deathbed Themes

Soteriology is the study of salvation (σωτηρία), a very prominent concept in African American deathbed rhetoric. The 'doing' of death, the coming to terms and coping with diagnosis and disease, is a process places demands on the dignity of the dying. Dying and death with dignity is an eventual and inescapable struggle that all will eventually face. For African Americans, this struggle is frequently complicated by the way that 'race' constructs and creates death in U.S. culture. Death studies scholars Kalish and Reynolds (1976) pointed out that, "To be black in America is to be part of a history

told in terms of contact with death and coping with death" (103). This history of black death in the U.S. is only explicable in the context of enslavement, Jim Crow and Post WWII socioeconomic conditions of inequity and continuing racial apartheid. Cone (1972) has observed, "Black people were well acquainted with death, for they lived under its threat every moment. The slave owners, in particular, and white people in general were vivid reminders that life could not be taken for granted. It had to be defended all the time by all possible means. To stay alive in dignity was the essential task of the black slave community" (75). Fear and anxiety at one's own mortality, or death anxiety, is defined as the emotional distress and insecurity heightened by encounters with death and thoughts of death (Kastenbaum, 2000). Researchers Tomer and Eliason (1996) have argued that death anxiety is influenced by personal regrets, a sense of satisfaction, and achievement of goals. This view proposes that death anxiety is heightened when a person does not perceive him/herself as having made good use of his/her life and does not feel that he/she has enough time to accomplish these goals before the end of life. On the other hand, death anxiety decreases if a person is content with his/her goals, accomplishments, and quality of life. Death is no stranger in the lives of African Americans. Black Americans have higher incidences of mortality than anyone else, and this can be linked to socioeconomic conditions such as poverty, low access to healthcare, and participation in life-threatening behaviors. Death anxiety, or thanatophobia, is basically defined as anxiety that occurs consciously and/or unconsciously as a result of anticipation of dying (Harmon-Jones, Simon, Greenberg, Pyszcynski, Solomon, & McGregor, 1997; Neimeyer, 1997; Rasmussen & Johnson, 1994). It is the emotional distress and insecurity heightened by encounters with dead bodies, people who are grieving, or other

reminders of mortality. These feelings of fear, anxiety, uneasiness, and discomfort can occur when one ponders the idea of what happens after death. This multi-faceted term can include varying concepts such as dying, fear of death and dying of oneself, and fear of death and dying of others. There are many perspectives or theories of human response to death. A large amount of research has been done on the topic, and as a result many analytic views of death response have been developed. Tomer (1994) stated it is important to acknowledge both philosophical and psychological perspectives of death. He reasons that the existential and phenomenological views of death are helpful. Becker (1973) contends that everyone experiences fear of death, including children. Death awareness in Becker's model is apparent from a very young age, as children struggle with the idea of non-existence; this awareness is seen as a natural part of human development. From the existential perspective, life and death co-exist and one cannot be existent without the other. From this view, the thought of one's own death is essential to helping to find meaning in one's life. Yalom (1980) stated that death awareness is important because "although the physicality of death destroys man [sic], the idea of death saves us" (30). Yalom goes on to say, "persons who reflect deeply on their mortality are expected to adopt more meaningful goals and commitments. There is some indirect evidence that contemplations of personal morality effect such changes" (103). Although there has been increased research interest regarding the dying process, academics still know cry little about the stories and experiences of individuals during their dying experience. People often face this phase of life in isolation, with fear, trepidation and a general lack of knowledge about what to expect (Butler, 2003). Some people are able to face death with grace and acceptance, while others leave this life fighting and resisting death. The

questions researchers may ask are: What differences are there in how a person faces dying and death, and how can healthcare professionals support and guide individuals through the dying process? Literature (Baines & Norlander, 2000; Bretscher et al, 1999; Hall, 2001; Hickman et al, 2004; Terry & Olson, 2004; Tong et al, 2003; Meier et al., 1998; Shaver, 2002) has identified the physical symptomatology and suffering experienced by many Americans during the dying process and emphasis that pain management and control of physical symptoms play an important role in promoting a good death (Block, 2001; Duggleby, 2000; Ferrell & Coyle, 2002; Forbes & Rosdahl, 2003; Kehl, K.A., 2006; Pierson et al., 2002; Singer et al., 1999; Steinhauser et al., 2000; Steinhauser et al, 2001; Ternstedt et al, 2002). The degree in which the psycho-social and spiritual needs of an individual are addressed, the level of support provided for loved ones, and the physical location of the dying and death also have a significant impact on the death experience (Bulter, 2003). In addition to these factors, what needs to be understood from the perspective of the patient is what actually goes on inside of the person, the inner life, which Butler (2003) defines as "the thoughts, sensations and feelings experienced by a person" (17). In the literature, the dynamics of the inner life have been reflected individually by the concepts of hope, suffering, dignity, transcendence and transformation. While the discussion of individual concepts such as hope and suffering have prompted important research concerning end of life care, there is still a gap in knowledge regarding the inner life of the individuals experiencing the dying process. Yet each of these concepts is important in the dying process.

Deathbed Subjectivity: Imagining Death

The subjectivity of the person passing approaches a identity transformation that has been represented in 20th century African American fiction as the opportunity for transcendence. Theorists of the experience of death itself, and the problematics of attempting to represent an experience where the subjective self reveal some of the discursive challenges of describing circumstance wherein language and cognition end. Inescapably personal, intimately tied to individual identity, yet profoundly and indisputably a process shaped by social signification and the quintessential cultural occasion. As one approaches death and is enmeshed within a physiological and psychological process that is uni-directional, incontrovertibly transformative, and imbued with the dramatic finality of permanent immigration from one's native land, the destination and possibility of posthumous continuity become the focus of attention. Physiological factors in the dying process, in terms of organic biology, disease course, risk management, and medical logic, as well as epidemiological profile, become the rubric for measuring the quality of death. Yet, subjectively, spiritual factors such as a belief in personal salvation, reunion with family and beloved community in an afterlife, the conviction of having served righteous or redemptive cause larger than one's self all become essential in the experience of dying and the quality of the deathbed. Death as an existential state and phenomenological journey can conflict with concerns about the process of dying arising out of standards, time-lines, treatment expectations, and goals of care suggested by the bio-medical model. Ideally, neither of these complexes, would over-determine the precedent's deathbed choices and expressions.

In *A Lesson Before Dying* and *Hiding Place*, the manner of death for each of the novel's death-bound characters Jefferson and Tommy is premature and involuntary -- both are going to be executed by the State -- however, both Jefferson and Tommy choose, with the help of elders in their communities, to manage dying as a process wherein they are agents, as opposed to victims. Though they have no hope of becoming survivors, both men decide to go to their deaths with the dignity of having relinquished attachment to a future 'self' and embraced the present-minded conviction that their experience of 'I' unto death would be one characterized by courage. While the former bio-medical more directly shapes views of death in dominant U.S. culture, the later is the operating interpretive framework for most African Americans.

In this chapter we examine the evaluation of deathbed beliefs and practices represented in the novels *A Lesson Before Dying* and *The Homewood Trilogy* as examples of African American literary thanatropic discourse. The assessment of deathbed ritual in the novel's plots, as well as preparatory *ars moriendi* used by the characters and narratorial voices highlights the relationship between the living and the dead through community storytelling. Secular humanist values expressed by Grant, the precedent Jefferson's interlocuter and deathbed attendant in *A Lesson Before Dying*, include beliefs about death and the afterlife that emerge from within the framework of African American history and storytelling.

Literary critic Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock has argued that, "haunting indicates that beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events," however, in North American postslavery narrative haunting is only one among numerous thanatic tropes,

which signals a submerged history (5). The rhetoric of death and dying in 20th century novels is partially about haunting, however, another more important but overlooked aspect of the rhetoric is the way in which it indicates a transcultural adaptation of West African thanatological discourse in the Americas. This is not to argue that there was ever any homogenous entity identifiable as ‘West African thanatology,’ but rather as Bernard Bell has argued, the range of West African cosmological and eschatological belief systems from which enslaved people were ripped all included a general “belief in the need to celebrate and maintain close harmony and balance between such realms as ...the living and the dead” (62). Within the syncretic adaption of West African cosmologies and European folk and Christian traditions for living in the Americas, enslaved people found that their beliefs about the power of the dead were similar enough to their enslavers’ beliefs that the dead became a resource in negotiations over power. Europeans and European Americans also entertained beliefs about the ability of the dead to act in the present and intervene on behalf of the living, though this stripe of belief was frequently denigrated as ‘superstition’ and accorded little respect in polite public discourse. Nonetheless, enough thanatological overlap existed and amalgamation occurred between peoples in the Americas that the ‘ghost story’ and other types of death discourse did mitigate racial power relations. For example, shared African diasporic and white American beliefs that the living inhabit a world shared with the dead and thick with spectral traffic served as the basis for veiled threats of posthumous retribution taken by the souls of murdered slaves upon guilty enslavers.

Yet, the domain of thanatological rhetoric concerned with haunting, apparitions and specters in 20th century African American fiction is only a slim sampling of black

North American death discourse. The broader context is one in which the positive celebration of the dead and participation of ancestors in community formation occurs in a dialectic with the negative potential of the dead to bring havoc and injuriously haunt the living. Death and dying in the black 20th century fiction is a resource from which social justice claims can be staged with supernatural gravity and decorum.

Neoslave narratives in the 20th century take up the specified thanatropes as the occasion for speech that directly confronts racial injustice. Social justice claims are premised on the space opened up by the bodies of the dead. The relationships between the living and the dead in this genre are continuous with West African cosmological representations of death that have continued to develop and evolve in what Immanuel Wallerstein calls “the extended Caribbean.” As with West African cosmology, the cultural history in the Americas integrates the dead into the experience of the living so that there is nothing necessarily pathological about haunting, though supernatural presences certainly can be the cause as well as outcome of traumatic encounters. The presence of ancestors in the lives of their descendants is part of realist discourse in both West African and African Diasporic thought. Thus, the term gothic must be modified to work within the context of the extended Caribbean to indicate postslavery literature in which haunting is unhealthy and signifies a divergence from normal and wholesome posthumous attachments between the living and the dead.

Deathbed Palliation: Family Presence & Beloved Community

The deathbed is never represented as a comfortable space in either *Hiding Place* or *Lesson*. Neither author romanticises the deathbed as sacred and transcendent, though it can be, nor do these novels represent the ancestral home as an uncomplicated space for a

womb-like return. Family, both living and dead, visit the deathbed of the characters in these novels without certainty that the presence will be comforting. Yet, without the presence of family and beloved community at the deathbed, it is sure to be painful. The absence or dis-integration of beloved community is a prominent theme in both novels (organized church and the preachers Benson and Ambrose are both suspect figures), both men facing execution are fated for death by contemporary lynching, the stories each revolve around the ancestral 'home' or location of family dead, and the novels both have plots shaped by the relationship between characters on their deathbed and their witnesses, or deathbed attendants. The idea of im/mobility that characterizes both racial oppression and becoming elderly references the experience of individual refugee life and forced migration in collective African American history. When contemplating the dis-integration of his community, the character Grant thinks, "Bill, Jerry, Claudee, Smity, Snowball -- all the others. They had chopped wood here too; then they were gone. Gone to the fields, to the small towns, to the cities -- where they died. There was always news coming back to the quarter about someone who had been killed or sent to prison for killing someone else...[teacher] could teach us any of us only one thing, and that one thing was flight. Because there was no freedom here. He said it, and he didn't say it. But we felt it" (63). Yet, Grant does not choose to take flight and to die in exile, he decides to stay explaining his reasoning, "left of the weighing scales and the derrick was the plantation cemetery, where my ancestors had been buried for the past century. The cemetery had lots of trees in it, pecans and oaks, and it was weedy too, and since there were so few gravestones, it was pretty hard to see many graves from the road...my people had worked these fields ever since slavery, and many of them were buried in the cemetery" (107).

Once Tommy knows that he is going to be murdered by the police in an extrajudicial killing, he seeks out a palliating family presence in his ancestral home. On the run, and afraid, he arrives to his great great great Aunt's deathbed shack, a structure that reminds him of "some damn slave cabin" and imagines Bess as living like "some wild, old-timey place where niggers still live like Africans or slaves...could be one of those huts in a slave row, one of those niggertown shacks clustered around Massa's big white house" (150, 78). Yet, Tommy also thinks, "Once upon a time. Once upon a time, if them stories I been hearing all my life are true, once upon a time they said God's green earth was peaceful and quiet. Seems like people bigger then," he then slips into a memory of his pregnant wife, "once upon a time him and Sarah alone in the middle of the night..You're in a story. There's room enough to do what you need to do...she is big as the sky...and when you hold your hand lightly above her breast so it just touches, just barely rubs the hard tip of her softness you can hear how it feels as your palm circles like coming in for a landing but no hurry, no rush, just gliding in slow circles in the air while you listen...stories are lies"(78). Cognitive dissonance plagues Tommy; he both longs to believe in the value of his inheritance and the stories of his ancestral and immediate family, yet he is haunted by the racist devaluation of black life in white supremacist mythology. Nonetheless, the contamination of his imagination with racist stereotypes exemplified in his characterization of Bess and her home does not completely erode his capacity to call on liberatory themes in African American deathbed stories; the metaphor of flight and the images of maternal fecundity and power embedded in his recollection of stroking his pregnant wife's nipple testify to Tommy's inheritance of valuable cultural assets in language.

Despite the denigration of the ancestral stories, (of Bruston Hill he thinks, “all she needs is a kerchief round her head. All he need is a watermelon and some chains” 78), he nonetheless, he feels comforted by the familiarity, wondering, “how the tall trees held on to the edge of the hill. The drop was steep, nearly perpendicular. If you jumped you would tumble forever, leave a trail of meat from the trees to the invisible river” (39). Trees are symbols of black folks in *Hiding*, Bess frequently conflates Tommy’s body shape with the shape of trees, especially his feet and legs, (“those long feet, those long legs” (91), and feet are special symbols of freedom. When the men in the local barber shop hear of Tommy’s predicament, one of the elder men reflects, “Terrible how they do you. They just stick you in jail and let you rot. Wasn’t nothing wrong with my feet till I went to jail. Went through the war and everything. In the jungle and the ocean and done every kind of nasty work a poor man has to do to stay alive. Went through all that and my feet fine till they rotted in the goddamn jail,” like wood rots (101). The man continued, “Jail’s a killer. Jail eats you up. Hope Tommy’s a thousand miles away,” but he wasn’t, and the man’s observation that jail is a slow deathbed is echoed later by Tommy in his refusal to return to die in jail and his expressed preference to die on the run (101). While dreaming in the shed on Bruston Hill where he spends his first night in hiding from the police searching to kill him, Tommy has a dream about his grandpa’s funeral, and a conversation with his boy Sonny about the nature of death. In the dream, his son and he walk down a beach and dialogue:

“Daddy, what is dying?”

“Dying’s what we all got to do someday.”

“When?”

“You know not the hour. That’s what the song says.”

“Why?”

“Cause it happens to everything. Trees, birds, people. Everything got to have a beginning. And if it got a beginning, it’s got to have a middle and then it’s got to end. People start by being born. Like you was, out your beautiful mama, Sarah. People live and that’s the middle. Dying is the end. Even mountains have to die.”

“Will I die?”

“Don’t have to be worrying about dying for a long time. You just started, little man.”

“Will you die?”

“When my time comes.”

“Will it come before I die?”

“Nobody knows. But you are just beginning. You probably be around long after I’m dead and gone.”

“I don’t understand. I don’t like it, Daddy.”

“Death’s a mystery. Life’s a mystery. Your cousin Kaleesha only here a few days. Don’t seem to make no sense, do it? Don’t nobody understand much bout any of it, you get right down to it. Just hold my hand” (122-23).

The dialogue ends with the two continuing down the beach with the back and forth questioning and explanation typical of a father and a seven year old boy. Cousin Kaleesha’s death as a reference point makes death real to Sonny, and the dream is Tommy’s cognitive processing of family tensions and his own death anxiety as he sleeps fitfully under the shed of his great great great Aunt. Tommy’s dreams as well as waking recollections of the life and death of his grandfather’s demonstrates a concern with the

way that one's death journey is bequeathed as an emotional and psychological inheritance for survivors. Tommy's inheritance, as well as his son's has been traumatic. Tommy attributes the adverse turn in his life trajectory toward unemployment and self-hate to the insecurity he experienced after the death of his grandfather John French. Recollecting on the series of decisions that leads him to Bruston Hill and his childhood there, he thinks, "The best time of his life. Cousins from up on Bruston Hill to play with, the house full of aunts and him the youngest, the spoiled darling. Then it all went to pieces when John French died. When he died in the bathroom and they couldn't get this body unwedged fromt eh bathtub and the toilet and the women had to get help and Fred Clark came and everybody screaming and finally they got him laid out across the bed but he was gone and it all went to pieces" (120). The vulnerability of black family life to the vicissitudes of financial pressure on the occasion of unexpected death are in part the result of racial oppression that leaves the family at more than a loss of life, but of financial support.

One resource that accumulates with death, and through the use of the deathbed for intergenerational communication if properly optimized, is story. Naming and story are featured in Wideman's novel as full of potential value, but also subject to devaluation depending on the reception of the audience. Sitting at Bess' table Tommy thinks, "Stories are lies" even as he listens to her rehearse the compendium of family history for his benefit (79). Tommy develops a phobia of death, and is unable to visit his other grandfather in the hospital on his deathbed. His estranged wife Sarah shares after his grandfather's funeral that he had been, "lying in a hospital bed getting more and more helpless...it was just too pitiful. Half the time he wouldn't even know if anybody was in the room with him," so that his deathbed was drained of social meaning for deathbed

attendants (119). Sarah castigates Tommy for calling their son 'Sonny' instead of Clyde at his Grandfather's funeral, reminding him that, "Mr. Lawson never called him Sonny," to which Tommy responds, "Never thought of calling him anything else. He called Tommy, Thomas Edgar. Never Just Thomas or Tommy but Thomas Edgar. Said the white man used to call us whatever he wanted. Uncle and Cuffy and Boy. Anything came into their heads. But now we got real names, *entitles*, he said, and if man got a name nobody had a right to call him out his name. He said he fought all his life for a name"(112). Later in Tommy's stay on Bruston Hill, Bess recalls the last time that she visited Homewood for the funeral of Tommy's niece Kaleesha, his sister's child. Bess recollects,

"They thought I had a power so Shirl brought her baby to see me and told me all about the terrible sickness and how it was in those beautiful eyes already. how it would steal those eyes and steal her ears and one day the lungs just forget all about breathing and the heart forget about beating and it was just a matter of time because those doctors named it and give up...they named it then they give up. Some terrible name. Couldn't nobody but the doctors say the name of that sickness killing your sister's baby," she tells Tommy, "She told me all about it. About hospitals and ambulances and shots and oxygen and pills and tests and I didn't understand none of it except them doctors settled on a name and then quit. Said they'd take the baby and hook it up to machines but just matter of time either way so she kept the baby home. Kept her home and watcher her day and night and if somebody asked me I woulda said it's th emama bout to die th eway she looked when she come up here with the baby on her back...and the baby looked fine.

fuzzy little head..she was a bouncy, smiley dimple-kneed sweet little brown baby with the prettiest eyes in the world....that's the kind of world always find something else to kill no matter how much you done buried already" (132-3).

Bess is demoralized and sickened over the death of the baby girl, and when she attends the baby's funeral she finds herself so grief stricken and sickened with unresolved bereavement over the loss of her own and only adult child that she withdraws to her isolated deathbed on Bruston Hill. The baby girl makes a return to the story however, in the end of the novel her ghost aids Bess in burning down the shack in the wake of Tommy's murder, helping to cleanse the connotations of the site of vestigial racist stereotypes and potentially creating through destruction the possibility that the space would be reclaimed by the living, and not just occupied by the dying with ghostly deathbed attendants. The baby girl's death leaves Bess wounded and drained of faith in the value of names or stories to effect change or have value. "Changing names like names could make a difference, like any of it made a difference," and, "ain't no need me trying to tell you nothing. And ain't no need of me listening to your troubles. And ain't no power ever gon change what's gon be. And what's gone be ain't never gon make no sense," is the philosophical position of antagonism toward Tommy's eventual position that names are powerful and meaningful. Bess' belief that names are powerful however is belied in her agitation at being called misnamed by her family and community, "Wish I know who started that Mother Bess mess. I ain't nobody's mama. Was once but that was a million pitiful years ago and ain't nobody on this earth go the right going around calling me mother now. I told them that...like I ain't got sense enough to know my own name and they ain't got sense to listen when I tell them I ain't nobody's mama" (80) Initially

Bess is hostile toward all language, and prefers her deathbed passage be silent, however, after three days of talking to Tommy she is changed by his attendance at her deathbed into a renewed member of the intergenerational family collective. The power of naming as knowing, and naming as a form of social status is conveyed in the description of the baby girl's disease course and the doctor's diagnosis. Bess cannot help the baby girl to survive, she has no special powers, but she does help the memory of the little girl to live and thus become part of the life of the community once again in the arson of the shack during the police raid for Tommy on Bruston Hill.

Public v. Private Death: The Legacy of Lynch Law

A pivotal distinction in the deathbed thanatope featured in *Hiding Place* and *A Lesson* is the question of whether a public deathbed or a private deathbed is spiritually and culturally appropriate. Bess chooses a private deathbed with few attendants, while Tommy chooses a public 'deathbed' -- each has their reasons rooted in the conjoined a dialectical relationship between (1) life with liberty and, (2) death with dignity. Clearly, Wideman comes down on the side of the public deathbed as most advantageous to the individual and the collective identity in that the novel's end sees Bess rescind her choice of an isolated deathbed attended by only ghosts, and the representation of Tommy's modern day lynching as generating not shame and social disrespect for his community but rather the opportunity for educating the police about how "they better listen and they better make sure it [racial violence] don't happen so easy ever again" (158). Gaines argues that public death is preferential even if the deathbed is one of immobility, imprisonment and bodily desecration as it provides the stage for social activism like the community strike, and conversion of whites with conscious to a position of anti-racist

politics (like the prison guard Paul), as well as the story of a martyr to embolden the drive and inspiration of inheritors, like the children who will receive the testimonial of Jefferson's dignified public death in their segregated classroom. Compared with the private deathbed of the character Mathew Antoine, former schoolhouse teacher who segregates himself in a nursing home and refuses most visitors, Jefferson's death becomes part of the collective identity and story. Gaines resignifies the implications of lynching and makes intertextual references to the black Christian tradition of telling Jesus' story as one of unfair public execution, dignity in death, and life in resurrection.

References in 20th century African American novels to the deathbed abound; in the context of 'Jim Crow' through contemporary forms of institutionalized and culturally anchored racial logic, metaphors and allegories of enslavement persist. Reminiscing about a deathbed conversation that he had with his predecessor at the school, the former teacher Matthew, Grant is struck by the insight offered him even if the advice was bitter and cynical. The legacy of lynch law in the U.S. South haunts the character Matthew, and deprives him of the subjective experience of 'being alive' or proud of his social justice activism as a teacher on the plantation schoolhouse. The former teacher is represented as in a state of living death, corpse like, pale and frigid. He tells Grant, "I'm cold," and when offered more wood for the fire he replies, "That's no good..I'll still be cold. I'll always be cold...You'll see, you'll see..I stay cold," (64). They argue bitterly about the benefits of leaving the plantation to seek education, the elder dying man is hopeless, cynical, and deeply wounded by his decision to spend his life in the plantation community as a 'savior' figure in his role as an educator. He tells Grant, "God has looked after them these past three hundred years without your help... You better go. Come back

some other time if you you like. I made a mistake,” and Grant is rejected as a death bed attendant. He returns to visit his mentor a month later and he brings wine to offer, saying “this will warm you up” (64). After some drinks the elderly Creole man begins his autobiography, a common deathbed rhetoric, sharing,

“I was afraid...I was afraid to run away. What am I? look at me. Where else could I have felt superior to so many but here? I *am* superior to you. I am superior to any man blacker than me...Just stay here long enough, he’ll make you the nigger you were born to be...that was your choice [to run]. But you won’t. you want to prove I’m wrong. Well, you’ll visit my grave one day and tell how right I was...What’s wrong with the University? Don’t they tell you? I can’t tell you anything about life? What do I know about life? I stayed here. You have to go away to know about life. There’s no life here. There’s nothing but ignorance here. You want to know about life? Well, it’s too late. Forget it. Just go on and be the nigger you were born to be, but forget about life. You make me tired, and I’m cold. The wine doesn’t help” (65).

Grant visits his mentor again a few months before his death, and we learn that the elder is only 43 years old, however, he is figured as aged because of the stressful social toll of living under the diagnosis of ‘race’ in an environment where blackness is a terminal diagnosis. Upon Grant’s return, he asks once again for the deathbed advice of his elder. Sitting by the fireplace, looking “terribly frail” and “coughing a lot” the man offers a “large, cold and bony” hand for Grant to shake (66). They sit by the fireplace, and in a terse and nihilist deathbed disclosure, Grant hears “Just do the best that you can. But it won’t matter,” (66). This deathbed ‘advice’ echos in Grant’s contemplations about

his role in Jefferson's life and the goals of his end-of-life care for Jefferson. Grant comes to share many of the feelings and sentiments expressed by his predecessor in the course of his teaching career in the quarters schoolhouse, sensing himself to be in a state of living death without hope of redemption or the possibility of social change. By the end of the novel, however, Jefferson's courageous decision to face his execution with dignity provides Jefferson with the capacity to see himself as instrumental in the larger, continuity of his community's life from enslavement to contemporary anti-racist activism.

Education and literacy have been avenues by which African Americans gained some public life and identity beyond the borders of family and immediate community. Education and literacy were also causes of public death for many African Americans: deaths that involved ritual humiliation and social trauma. Early 20th century death poetics, such as the fantastic modernist text *Cane* (1923) by Harlem Renaissance writer Jean Toomer, responded to the rhetorical situation of 'Jim Crow' by producing allegories of death, 'race,' and resistance. In Toomer's poem 'Reapers' (1923), the horror of 'lynch law' in the apartheid South is refracted through a common thanatic trope of diagnosis. Thanatic rhetoric highlighting the disease course, and then the eventual deathbed in Toomer's work figure the actual death as martyrdom. For example, *Cane* signified on the genre of anti-lynching journalism by the NAACP in a passage from the section 'Kabnis' that recalls an actual lynching in 1921 Georgia:

They killed her in the street, an some white man seein the risin in her stomach as she lay there soppy in her blood like any cow, took an ripped her belly open, an

the kid fell out. It was living, but a nigger baby ain't supposed to live. So he jabbed his knife in it an stuck it in a tree. An then they all went away.

The novels *Hiding Place* and *Lesson* recall the legacy of public death and ritual humiliation typical of lynchings, offering the executions of Tommy and Jefferson as allegories of lynching and its consequences for collective black identity. Lynching was just one form of violence specifically directed against people of African descent that helped to generate the rhetorical climate and context for popular images and understandings of the relationship between 'blackness' and death. The NAACP reported that at least 2,522 African Americans were murdered by white lynching between 1889 and 1918 (7). Creative writing such as the collection *Cane* mirrored life in their representations of death, while also embracing the tragic kairos presented by death. The opportunity for redemption and confrontation with Southern apartheid practices that those on their 'deathbed' gained because of the social gravity accorded to this location as a source of wisdom and power (including intended lynching victims who knew that they would soon be dead), sought to reduce African American vulnerability and to alter the pattern of black morbidity in the U.S.

Three types of 'death threats' that were intended to force African Americans into a form of 'bare life' run through the corpus of African American writing during the era of 'Jim Crow.' These perennial threats to black life, or markers of social death were the 1.) threat of neo/slave laws, 2.) the threat of psychological and physical death by torture, and 3.) the threat that one's body would be used by slave patrols as a message to convey the threat of death to the larger community (Purdue, 1999). In African American novels, slave laws are remembered as authorizing whites to act as, in the words of Frederick

Douglass, “accuser, judge, jury, advocate, and executioner” over black life. In *Lesson*, Jefferson death is announced in the last sentence of the first chapter in a single dangling line, “Death by electrocution. The governor would set the date,” the finality and sovereignty of that sentence is indicative of the way that power over black life and death is represented in African American creative writing in the body of 20th century work (9). Secondly, torture and corporal punishment were forms of social disrespect that devalued and dehumanized black life. In *Hiding Place* when the police come to murder Tommy, Bess thinks, “he was a tall lean thing like those trees and it hurt her to see those feet when they were so still, so long and raggedy because she could see the run in them, the scared rabbit eyes in them as plain as the holes in his high-heeled shoes,” in this example of a representation of social disrespect the corporal punishment occurs through forcing the person to perpetually live as a refugee, and the sense of devaluation of black life is contagious -- Tommy’s torture is the result of systemic socio-economic segregation but the pain is not delimited to his life alone, it overflows to ‘hurt’ even those removed from his everyday existence (154). Third, slave patrols are remembered as remaking the murdered black body into a symbol of social communication about the devalued status of black life in the U.S. South. When Jefferson first receives visitors to his prison cell, he tells them “I’m a old hog...youmans don’t stay in no stall like this. I’m a old hog they fattening up to kill,” as he refuses the food sent by his Aunt to the prison (83). In the thanatic rhetoric of black writers, these memories are resignified with alternative meanings that reference traditions of martyrdom, sacrifice, desire for righteous retribution, and the eschatological prediction of a redeemed future in which divine law will bring racial justice. Black rhetors in the latter half of the 20th century context of

North America have seized the opportunity to participate in public death rituals, including obituary, funerary procession and other forms of memorialization in their efforts to constitute a public sphere free from death-threats.

Witnessing and the Deathbed: Inheritances of Traumatic Memory

In the three days that Tommy spends on Bruston Hill with Bess, he hears the stories of his family and community, about their lives and deaths. He listens with some patience, but is skeptical of the accuracy of the stories that he has heard. Bess rebukes his doubt, telling him, “Well, I aint’ just talking. I’m a witness and couldn’t care less what you believe. Your believes is your business. But I say what I know, not what I hear” (82). Bearing witness to the past, especially the traumatic past is a significant theme in the representations of the deathbed in *Hiding Place* and *A Lesson*. On the day of Jefferson’s execution, Grant decides not to be with him and the other attendants. Instead he remains at work on the plantation, sitting alone in the church/school thinking about the history of death in his community.

“Where were all the others now? Most had gone. To southern cities, to northern cities, others to the grave...I did not want to think. I wanted to sit there until I heard, but not to think before then. No, I wanted to go to my car and drive away. To go somewhere and lose all memory of where I had come from. I wanted to go, I wanted to -- God, what does a person do who knows there is only one more hour to live? I felt like crying, but I refused to cry. NO, I would not cry. There were too many more who would end up as he did. I could not cry for all of them, could I?”(249)

The waves of successive loss in Grant's small black rural community from exodus, exile and death weigh heavily on his ability to manage grief. He manages his grief by repression, and refuses to begin the mourning process because the task seems overwhelming as well as futile. The long history of wrestling with the answer to the question of how to reinvent the traumatic epidemic of loss and death as opportunity and resource is referenced by Gains in his representation of Grant's emotional and psychological state. Inheritance of traumatic memory, survival of enslavement, and the memorialization of victims is the triadic circumstance that circumscribes both Grant and Jefferson's relationship to death. Neither community 'son' has a biological father in the novel, but each inherit the patrimony of the collective African American experience, including intellectual forefathers and foremothers. Though Grant is dismissive and belittling toward his intellectual predecessors and elders in the novel, especially the plantation quarters pastor, Reverend Ambrose, as well the man whose job Grant takes, the former teacher Matthew Antoine. However, by the novel's close Grant has renewed appreciation for his intellectual ancestor's success in having survived and fought against state sanctioned racial violence.

The history of resistance to black morbidity caused by racial violence has ironically involved the use of the deathbed as a rhetorical stage from which to issue reprimands to society as a whole, and to suggest specific remediation policies for bringing about a more democratic nation. Frederick Douglass' death at the turn of the 20th century marked an occasion when black writers began to vigorously memorialize the martyrs of racial justice struggle and to imagine the ancestors as operative in contemporary protests against apartheid politics. However, from the beginning of

Africans writing in the Americans, death related compositions have been present in the form of obituary and elegy. In the advertisement for Frederick Douglass' funeral march visual rhetoric was used to motivate the audience's belief that resistance to racial oppression and death were cousins; the ad was framed by pictorials of the history of racial oppression, and is a good demonstration of the tradition of representing funerary rites and public memorial as political action. In his magisterial tour of national collective memory of the *Civil War Race and Reunion* (2001), historian David Blight describes and analyzes public memorials of the Civil War with the conclusion that contemporary racial politics are rooted in these practices of remembering.

Blight in his work on the racial politics of Reconstruction argues that dominant white postbellum memorial practices allowed for the invention of a national 'rebirth' narrative that never acknowledged black death, but instead sought to desecrate the symbolic graves of dead African Americans by refusing them honorific remembrance. Summarizing the historical course of conflict and reconciliation over how to remember the Civil War, Blight details the progression of memory practices, including discursive practices, which eventuate in 20th century Civil War representations 'sanitized' of black participation. The erasure of African Americans from the national death and rebirth narrative had the effect of obscuring the tradition of speaking on behalf of the dead for the benefit of the living by African American rhetors. The import of African American thanatic rhetoric on early versions of the 'death and rebirth narrative' is illustrated by the influence of Frederick Douglass's public speech on the memory of the Civil War. Blight argues that, "no contemporary Northerner contributed more to the war's ideological meaning and memory than Frederick Douglass" (15, 2001). For example, in a speech

entitled “The Mission of the War,” given by Douglass on his talk circuit in 1863-64, the theme of sacrifice is prominent. Martyrdom and sacrificial death for the sake of freedom are themes that reoccur in African American rhetoric in both the 19th and 20th centuries. Novels such as *Hiding Place* and *A Lesson* continue in the tradition of Douglass to represent black participation in collective death and rebirth as substantial and robust. The power of bearing witness to injustice for those giving testimonial is represented as empowering and therapeutic by both Wideman and Gains.

In Douglass’s speech mentioned above, he insists that, in Blight’s paraphrase of Douglass “by whatever unjust means blacks ha[ve] to die in uniform to be acknowledged” they would. In order to see slave society buried without chance of political resurrection, individuals would become sacrificial subjects (17). A similar ethos of sacrifice imbues the narrative of *Hiding Place* and *A Lesson*; in each case the precedents become politicized prior to death, and come to believe that their death’s have a meaning due to the intersubjective recognition and influence that their death will have in fighting against racial oppression and injustice. Douglass’s use of death related metaphors to describe the process of political revolution hoped for by antislavery activists and abolitionists tapped into the rhetorical force that the idea and imagery of death conjured in 19th century U.S. culture. Wideman and Gains capitalize on this same rhetorical force by offering novels that represent the deathbed trajectory of characters imbricated in the inheritance of those same 19th century ideological structures that Douglass aims to dismantle. The general 19th century cultural mandate to honor the dead was capitalized on by Douglass in his efforts to further his ideology in public speech. The inheritance of African American thanatic rhetoric enabled Douglass to formulate a

description of events that hailed blacks and whites to pay respect to the dead. Although he said that the “shadow of death” would haunt the nation, Douglass believed that the “weeds of mourning” would eventually give way to a political landscape cleared of slavery. Blight has shown that metaphors of death and rebirth circulating on the national level in the 1860s were mirrored by individual stories of death and dying told by the war’s survivors. The scale of death experienced during the Civil War meant that metaphors of death carried new personal meaning to a broader audience who had lived through the chaos. Likewise, survivors of the chaos of enslavement constructed stories about sacrificial death in order to make meaning out of the disaster. These stories reveal that public memorials including funerary rites are, “a struggle among the living over the meaning of the dead” (Blight, 52, 2001). In the novels by Wideman and Gaines analyzed in this chapter, we can see a similar operation at work in the psychology of characters struggling with the passage from life to death, and the attribution of meaning to this passage for the purpose of paying respect to the ancestral community. In *Hiding Place*, Wideman performs a tribute to the dead by representing Tommy’s passage as beginning and ending at the Bruston Hill water tower, a symbol of the vessels used in the middle-passage. In *A Lesson*, Gaines honors the memories of the dead by representing Jefferson’s death as the justification for all work to stop on the plantation. Jefferson’s modern-day lynching is responded to by his community in a manner that diverges from the historical antecedents of black life on the plantation -- in the contemporary moment represented in the novel, black community has the power to call for a ‘day of respect’ for the dead in the form of a labor shut-down. Though only one day, this strike by the

collective is a demonstration of the power that death has as a rhetorical ground for commentary and social justice action.

The tropes described along the continuum of African American death ritual in previous chapters afford the opportunity for progressive political speech. The deathbed is represented as the most pivotal and powerful of these thanatropes. Protected by the special occasion of dying and death, this political speech has also called on the State to uphold citizen rights. As in life, in literature the occasion of death marks the moment when actors can engage in aesthetic performances normally prohibited in public space, such as collective marching, vocalizations, readings, choreography, poetics, etc. Communal observation of funerary rites in essence, marks a political moment in public space when collective identity and history is created.

The failure of Reconstruction and the erection of the apartheid regime of Jim Crow in the U.S. South served as the political and cultural context and background for African Atlantic thanatological discourse practices seen in 20th century African American fiction. Death ritual and rhetoric in cosmopolitan centers in North America that had evident ceremonial West African roots, such as the New Orleans 'Jazz' funeral, continued to be sites for racial power contests in the early 20th century, and the blues tradition is also central to the representations of dying presented in *Hiding Place*, as Bess' dead husband returns to whistle the blues to her on her deathbed. However, unlike the isolated deathbed of Bess, in most representations of black deathbeds, including Jefferson's in *A Lesson*, white spectatorship at these events meant that they were never truly segregated. In rural areas where death traditions enjoyed less pageantry, yet shared in the general pattern of African American death practices, white power would enter the

mortuary arena in the form of white affiliates of the decedent's family taking a seat at the funeral or standing by the graveside services. 'Homegoings,' or funerals, in both rural and urban African American communities as represented in 20th century African American novels, were a time to contemplate the meaning of the decedent's life and death in relation to the future and the redemptive eschatology of black North American Christian cosmology. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley in his introduction to thanatologist Charlton McIlwain's *Death in Black and White* (2003) notes that, "a homegoing belies the mainstream, popular image of a funeral because it is a celebration. Sure, the mourners wail and cry, but they shout for joy, praise God for taking the deceased 'home' where there is no more toil or trouble" (ix). In the context of white-on-black violence in 20th century U.S., the prospect of going 'home' is imagined in black thanatological rhetoric as a potential 'freedom journey,' although there is a strong ethic against hastening one's natural death. For example, neither Jefferson nor Tommy want to die, but they are each reconciled to the eventuality of that event and the possibility that it will arrive unnaturally, violently, and prematurely is managed by committing their deaths to the cause of their respective communities.

Although the precedents' ultimate liberation from tyranny and transcendent escape are framed in the thanatic rhetoric of Wideman and Gains as cause for mournful celebration, the event of death also sanctions the potential future racial justice jeremiads. In African American history, death gathers about itself a certain rhetorical gravity, which writers like Ida B. Wells-Barnett used to diagnose the causes of black death at the turn of the 19th century (see her courageous expose, *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States, 1892-1894* (1895). Thanatic rhetoric in

late 20th century uses the occasion of de facto State sanctioned violence against black life in the U.S after WWII to argue about the relationship between death, dignity and freedom. Death persists as the moment for opposition to racial injustice in literature and public life.

Martrydom: Sacrificial Subjects & Death as a Community Resources

In the final pages of *Hiding Place*, Bess is shocked out of her commitment to die on Bruston Hill when Tommy is gunned down from the water tower as he attempts to escape the police. Tommy's brief attendance at her deathbed, while attempting to hide from his own, had left her feeling, "something cracking, like ice, like a brittle shell. Almost on the beat. Less a crackling than quick loud pops following one another like fireworks on the Fourth of July," the metaphorical sound of Bess' heart opening back to the life of her family merges in this passage with the sound of the police gunfire, as her memory of Tommy and the current moment of his execution blend together. The devastating pain of Bess' end-stage dis-ease causes her to seize, unable to move until the pain passes. Her relationship with Tommy had changed her determination to die alone, and his death is the catalyst that raises Bess from her deathbed and propels her back into the collective embrace of Homewood. When Bess awakens and hears the sounds of Tommy being shot by the police, sees their sirens and spotlights on the water tower, she is undone by grief, anger and righteous indignation. The narrative voice slides into the surrealist perspective of Bess on the edge of sanity, interpreting the embers of the Bruston Hill hiding place going up in flames as the sparks of her great great great grand niece's ghost, and calling on the assistance of the baby ghost and her dead husband. Tommy's return to the "place he belongs" and sacrificial murder at the water tower

brings the novel's plot full circle. Once Tommy becomes resolved to return himself to community life and depart Bess' and his conjoined deathbed, he shares with her that,

“they [police] can kill me but I still ain't killed nobody and I ain't scared. All they can do is kill me cause I ain't going back to nobody's gooddamn jail. I was scared a long time. Ever since my granddaddy John French died and his house fell to pieces and everybody scattered I been scared. Scared of people, scared of myself. Of how I look and how I talk, of the nigger in me. Scared of what people said about me. But I got no time to be scared now. Ain't no reason to be scared now cause ain't nothing they can take from me now. Lost my woman, lost my son, shamed all the family I got down there. So it's just me and I know I ain't killed nobody so fuck em. Motherfuck em I say. Let them find me and kill me if they can but I know who I am and know what I did, and I'm ready to live now. I ain't ready to die. Hell no. I'm ready to live and do the best I can cause I ain't scared” (151).

Tommy's expression of defiance, hope, reconciled anger and fear, and courage typify the stage of death anxiety wherein the person is accepting of their own mortality, insightful about their own identity and interpersonal relationships, and capable of articulating a perspective of non-attachment and stoicism. Tommy's disclosure to Bess of his deathbed sense-of-self coherence and determination to have more life in his days, even if fewer days in his life, becomes necessary for Beth to publicize once Tommy is murdered by the police. Bess takes Tommy's statement as a type of advanced directive, a deathbed statement of identification, that she must respect upon his death by sharing with others.

Bess attempts to dissuade Tommy from returning to life; she attempts to persuade him to remain in the hiding place sharing her deathbed, however, he feels it necessary to continue 'running' even if it cost him his life; he would prefer to die with dignity than to live without liberty. The course of the entire novel takes place in the three day time-span that Tommy and Bess spend together on Bruston Hill joined in debate, argument and contemplation of the politics of the deathbed and the implication that their respective deaths will have for them as individuals and for their family. Tommy is adamant that his deathbed ought be public and absent fear; like Jesus, Tommy seeks resurrection from (social) death on the third day, "Wouldna been three days. Wouldna been five minutes if I left when you told me to leave. Sleeping in some damn shed. You supposed to be my people and you run me off like I was a disease," Tommy reminds her. Though upon Tommy's initial arrival Bess was hostile to sharing her isolate deathbed and offering Tommy refuge, over the course of the three days he spends with her his deathbed attendance radically changes Bess' attitude toward the process of dying and her desire to have human communion in the end stage -- she wants him to stay. Bess tells him that the police, "They be waiting...you be dead and buried ten times over they still got plenty of time...that ain't all that's down there means you harm," to which Tommy replies, "He confronts Bess about her deathbed choice, saying "Why you stay up here, old woman? You scared ain't you? You been just as scared up here as I been down there. And if I'm hiding, you're hiding too. But I'm hiding so I can run. You just hiding. You let them whip all the run out you. I don't want to go that way...stuck in some damn slave cabin" (150). Defensive of her decision to withdraw from community life and live isolated and impoverished on their ancestral land, Bess defends herself by invoking the spirit of her

dead husband and the unrecognized grief and alienation she endures because those of her cohort have already died. She retorts, “Had a man who could whistle more music than you find in all them radios. You don’t know nothing about the blues. Youall missed the blues...Youall ain’t never heard no music. Hmmmmp” (150). Chagrined by Tommy’s judgement of her deathbed choice -- her decision to withdraw from the dynamics of their family and ‘hide’ on Bruston Hill while awaiting her death -- Bess justifies her actions in terms of the futility of seeking deathbed solace from a community of friends and family who cannot not empathize with her experience of loss. Tommy is adamant, however, that the deathbed passage is not an intermediate stage between life and death, but that their lives are owed their community up until the last breath. “Maybe you’ll just keep on hiding up here till one day that boy, Clement, finds you dead. Like you always be telling me, that’s your business. But it ain’t no life. That ain’t no life for me. I got to take a chance. As messed up as I am I got to get down from here and take my chance” (151). Bess continues her recitation of her deceased husband’s musical skills, mourning the passing of her generation of black folks connected to the blues tradition, and implying that the community she would rejoin if she ‘came down’ to Homeowood to die instead of remaining on Bruston Hill would be one that lacked cultural awareness of their shared patrimony and intellectual inheritance byway of the blues. The dialogue between Tommy and Bess in this closing chapter of the novel is Wideman’s meditation on the politics of loss, remembrance and the conditions under which death can be a community asset or resource. The opportunity to participate in and palliate the suffering of one on their deathbed, as Tommy and Bess have done for each other, is represented as therapeutic not only to the precedent, but to the deathbed witness and thus larger community. Bess is

emotionally undone by the bravery and sacrificial action of Tommy's return to collective life, however short. He reclaims his identity and is capable of making the choice to die under his own circumstance -- upon his death Bess' grief and anger overwhelm her and she decides to burn down the top of Bruston Hill, the cradle and the grave of the Owens-Lawson-French-Hollinger family.

Bess experiences a seizure while attempting to get outside to see what is going on: "Old as she is she has good ears...Oh Jesus. Oh Good God Almighty. She damns the weakness that makes her stand there shaking. She damns the crackle of gunfire and damns the sudden stillness that has followed the shots...too weak to punish the police swarming over Bruston Hill...she damns them and hobbles back to her porch, an old woman startled from her sleep in the middle of the night, an old woman in a dark house who knows it's too late to help him, who knows he's long gone, who knows her arms are too weak to lift him and carry him back where he belongs. She damns her weakness. She strikes a match and lights the grocery bags she had balled up and stuffed under the grate of the stove," and begins to imagine the arrival of dead allies, a "patient little blue-gowned angel," that "flits through the darkness like a lightening bug, touching this and that with her wand, what she kisses bursts into flame. She has beautiful black eyes," and Bess realizes it is the ghost of Tommy's niece, his sister's daughter who died as an infant and whose funeral was the last family in which Bess participated (157-58). Tommy's sister brought her terminally diagnosed infant daughter to Bruston Hill for a visit with 'Mother Bess' before the girl died, hoping to have some advice, support, blessing that would allow the child to live. "We gon do it, gal. Yes we are. Thank you you little blue-gowned, black-eyed thing. Thank you you little fuzzy-headed got the prettiest black-eyed

lazy Susan eyes in the whole world thing. Don't matter if they's crossed a little bit, don't matter if they roll round sometime like they ain't got no strings and gon on about they own business. And you. You get up off that bed, man. Cause it's going too, everything in here going so get your whistling self up off that bed and come on...Because somebody has to go down there and tell the truth. Lizabeth's boy didn't kill nobody. He wasn't scared. All he needed was another chance and somebody needs to go down there and tell them. And she was going to do just that. Burn down that last bit of shack on Bruston Hill and tell them what they needed to know...she's coming to tell them he ain't scared no more and they better listen and they better make sure it don't happen so easy ever again" (158). The urge to bear witness for Tommy and to offer testimonial about his 'last words' is also a rejection of her former choice to segregate herself from her the Homewood collective and to resign from her role as community elder. Even Bess' invocation of 'the dead' in the shape of the baby girl's ghost and her husband is an indication that she is re-entering the continuum of family identity and collective life that connects the living and the dead. When Bess' decides to 'come down' of Bruston Hill from her deathbed, she chooses to bring her dead with her as a resource for the cause of clearing Tommy's name and re-installing his identity as a source of solace and pride to their family story.

A powerful example of death being mobilized in for racial justice struggle occurred in the aftermath of the murder of the young Emmitt Till in 1955 Mississippi. The 14 year-old Till was kidnapped, tortured and murdered by outraged white supremacists after a breach of Jim Crow racial etiquette when Till flirted with a white woman. After recovery of Till's body and return of the remains to his family in Chicago,

Till's mother refused to keep the coffin lid closed and instead offered her son's body as evidence against the crimes of apartheid style violence. The funerary stage, and dramatics of mortuary ritual afforded Jett Magazine journalists the chance to circulate a scathing critique of racial injustice based on the photographic evidence of Till's mutilated body. Although the context of black thanatological rhetoric has shifted over the course of the second-half of the 20th century to one in which black morbidity represented in African American fiction takes place in a rhetorical situation characterized by an increasing focus on environmental racism, confinement and incarceration, and the negative health outcomes of socioeconomic disparities, the role of violence in black life is still influential in shaping thanatological rhetoric.

In the closing chapter of *A Lesson Before Dying* the politics of the deathbed and the experience of bearing witness are explored by Gaines in the exchange of Jefferson's deathbed diary from the prison guard Paul and Grant. Jefferson's deathbed epistolary collection he entrusts to Paul, who brings it to Grant after Jefferson's execution. Like *Hiding Place*, *A Lesson* references and signifies on the story of Jesus' narrative. Whereas in *Hiding*, the resurrection is the aspect of Jesus' narrative that is most significant, in *A Lesson* the production of disciplines bearing witness to the life and death of the protagonist is the most important theme. Paul arrives to the schoolhouse where Grant has the children 'on their knees' praying, "the plantation was quiet," because, "even those who worked for Henri Pinchot or for other white people along the river had taken the day off. This had been discussed and agreed at church last Sunday. Those who were not at church were told what the others had decided, that he, Jefferson, should have all their respect his one day" -- he leaves the children praying while he and Paul take a walk

(247). As they walk through the quarters together the white prison guard Paul discloses to him,

“He wanted me to bring you this...do you have a minute...It went as well as it could have gone...there was no trouble. He was a little shaky -- but no trouble...He was the strongest man in that crowded room, Grant Wiggins...He was, he was. I’m not saying this to make you feel good, I’m not saying this to ease your pain. Ask that preacher, ask Harry Williams. He was the strongest man there. We all stood jammed together, no more than six, eight feet away from that chair. We all had each other to lean on. When Vincent asked him if he had any last words, he looked at the preacher and said, ‘Tell Nannan I walked.’ And straight he walked, Grant Wiggins. Straight he walked. I’m a witness. Straight he walked...After they put the death cloth over his face, I couldn’t watch anymore. I looked down at the floor...I heard the two jolts, but I wouldn’t look up. I’ll never forget the sound of the generator as long as I live on this earth...I didn’t open the notebook...I didn’t think it was my place to open the notebook. He asked me to bring it to you, and I brought it to you. But I would like to know his thoughts sometime -- if you don’t mind...If I could ever be of any help, I would like you to call on me. I mean that with all of my heart...Allow me to be your friend Grant Wiggins. I don’t ever want to forget this day. I don’t ever want to forget him...I don’t know what you are going to say when you go back in there. But tell them he was the bravest man in that room today. I’m a witness, Grant Wiggins. Tell them so” (256).

Grant replies, “Maybe one day you will come back and tell them so,” to which Paul responds, “It would be an honor” (256). When Grant re-enters the schoolroom and

has the children rise from prayer, he faces them crying. Gaines ends the novel with this scene: the deathbed attendant facing an audience ready to receive testimonial about the meaning and implication of Jefferson's death to the identity of their community.

Jefferson's death has been remade over the course of the narrative into an event that draws together witnesses and attendants across the chasm of 'race' and generation on the former plantation. The deathbed journal Jefferson authors is proof of his humanity and redemption in the tradition of slave narratives in African American history. Grant's decision to not attend the execution he justifies to himself while awaiting news of Jefferson's death in the schoolhouse with the children. Repenting his former condemnation of the community preacher for his religiosity, which Grant framed as 'lying,' in his self-reflection and internal dialogue Grant wrestles with his decision, thinking "But who was with him? Who is with you, Jefferson? Is He with you, Jefferson? He is with reverend Ambrose, because Reverend Ambrose believes. Do you believe, Jefferson? Have I done anything to make you not believe? If I have, please forgive me for being a fool. For at this moment, what else is there? I know that that old man is much braver than I. I am not with you at this moment because -- because I would not have been able to stand. I would have embarrassed you. But the old man will not. He will be strong. He is going to use *their* God to give him strength. You just watch Jefferson. You just watch. He is brave, braver than I, braver than any of them -- except you, I hope. My faith is in you, Jefferson" (240). When Paul arrives to the schoolhouse/church with the testimonial about Jefferson's success in fulfilling the wish of his community that he go to his death with dignity, Grant's faith in Jefferson's courage is validated.

In both *Hiding* and *Lesson* the relationship between the soon to be martyred character and their deathbed attendants, or the witnesses to their death, are relationships of sustenance for faith in the humanistic vision of ‘racial’ justice and eventual redemption for the beloved community. The experience of deathbed attendance at the unnatural and premature passing of young black men embroiled in the system of captivity and incarceration associated with post WWII prison-industry represented in the novels *Hiding Place* and *A Lesson Before Dying* is harrowing and demoralizing, yet, when the precedent (like Tommy or Jefferson) face their own mortality with dignity and resolve for the purpose of emboldening their community’s faith, the surviving witnesses (like Bess and Grant) gain resolution and strength to commit toward ongoing social justice struggles.

CHAPTER 5

“BURY ME IN A FREE LAND”: BURIAL & BEREAVEMENT IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD* & ALICE WALKER’S *THE COLOR PURPLE*

“Hey, dere, y’all! Don’t dump dem bodies in de hole lak dat! Examine every last one of em and find out if they’s white or black.’
‘Us got tuh handle’em slow lak date? God have mussy! In de condition they’s in got tuh examine’em?
What difference do it make ‘bout de color? dey all needs buryin’ in uh hurry.’
‘Got orders from headquarters. They makin’ coffins fuh all de white folks. ‘Tain’t nothin’ but cheap pine, but dat’s better’n nothin’. Do’t dump no white folks in de hole jus’ so.’
‘What tuh do ‘bout de colored folks? Got boxes fuh dem too?’
‘Nope. They canin’t find enough of ‘em tuh go’round. jus’ sprinke plenty quick-lime over’em and cover’em up.’
‘Shucks! Nobody can’t tell nothin’ bout some uh dese bodies, de shape dey’s in. Can’t tell whether dey’s white or black...’
‘Look at they hair, when you can’t tell no other way. And don’t lemme ketch none uh y’all dumpin’ white folks, and don’t be wastin’ no boxes on colored. They’s too hard tuh git holt of right now.’
‘They’s mighty particular how dese folks goes tuh judgement,’ Tea Cake observed of the man working next to him. ‘Look lak dey think God don’t know nothin’ ‘bout de Jim Crow law.’”

--Tea Cake, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 170-171.

“Where my daddy buried, I ast. That all I really want to know.

Next to your mammy, he say.

Any marker, I ast.

He look at me like I’m crazy. Lynched people don’t git no marker, he say. Like this something everybody know.

Mama got one? I ast.

He say, Naw...

By the time us got to the cemetery, the sky gray. Us look for Ma and Pa. Hope for some scrap of wood that say something. But us don’t find nothing but weeds and cockleburrs and paper flowers fading on some graves. Shug pick up a old horseshoe somebody horse lose. Us took that old horseshoe and us turned round and round together until we were dizzy enough to fall out, and where us would have fell us stuck the horseshoe in the ground.

Shug say, Us each other’s people now, and kiss me.

--Celie, *The Color Purple*, 167

Burial is only one form of human disposal of the remains of the dead.¹⁰²

Interment to the ground is the typical form of ritual treatment of the remains of humans in African America.¹⁰³ Ellen Watkins Harper's poem 'Bury Me in a Free Land' (1864) conveys a sentiment expressed repeatedly in 20th century African American fiction, that is: the desire to be buried with respect. In the last chapter we followed the 'death-bound' subject to the edge of their life journey, and we confronted the ritual circumstances of that threshold as represented in creative fiction by black authors. For the dying, grappling with a 'race' based diagnosis, and the experience of "going home" are the final steps in which participation is possible. Participation, that is, without the help of others. The dead can continue to participate in the unfolding of death ritual through the actions and memories of survivors. This is exactly what is demonstrated in the fiction of the authors analyzed in this chapter. Pairing Zora Neale Hurston with Alice Walker, we learn that interment of the dead and the provision of culturally appropriate funerary rites stand as a diagnostic rubric for determining the status and possibility of community health, especially women's reproductive and sexual health.

Burial and Black Life

Burial is a prominent novelistic trope, a literary device, a metaphor in language, a rhetorical technique, a ritual necessity, and a cultural rite (or wrong) in 20th century African American fiction. It is also represented as a significant moment of 'racial' definition -- the occasion for discipline and the reinforcement of racial identity. Pulitzer

¹⁰² See E. Bendann, *Death Customs* (1930, repr. 1969); R. Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand* (tr. 1960); R. W. Habenstein and W. M. Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing* (rev. ed. 1962) and *Funeral Customs the World Over* (rev. ed. 1963); R. Huntington and P. Metcalf, *Celebrations of Death* (1979).

¹⁰³ *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, Special Issue, dedicated to the excavation of African American cemeteries and the resulting information on Reconstruction and Slavery, 1987.

Prize winner Alice Walker's creation of a 'black' artistic relationship to Harlem Renaissance writer and literary foremother Zora Neale Hurston was consolidated, for example, during Walker's pilgrimage to Hurston's unmarked grave and Walker's subsequent efforts to have Hurston's burial place recognized. In this chapter, we're approaching the tale-end of the dying process. In some cosmologies, the death of the individual is not complete until their transcendent spirit has travelled some imagined distance. In the case of African America, the death of the individual, and their rebirth into the collective ancestry, only happens when survivors and descendants stop observing the steps of bereavement at the burial location, Visiting the dead, having certainty about the condition and location of the body, community viewing, congregation at the graveside, family visits to cemetery, waking with family and friends for several days of eating and community building around the home of the decedent, invoking the identities of the decedent's survivors reverentially -- these are components of the burial thanatope in African American literature. In the examples excerpted from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), the burial thanatope is intertextually relevant to the reader. The preface to *Eyes* notes, "Reading in an essay by a white folklorist that Hurston was buried in an unmarked grave, Walker decided that such a fate was an insult to Hurston and began her search for the grave to put a marker on it.

That Hurston was buried in an unmarked grave in a racially segregated cemetery in Florida is consonant with the conditions of black funerary circumstance for indigent decedents, although atypical within African America. Burial is a life-event usually celebrated with stories about the dead, attendance at the graveside for interment of the

body by all members of immediate, extended and beloved community, and a commemorative identifier if possible placed at the burial site. So strong is the cultural predilection toward memorial markers for the dead that burial sites are frequently oriented around lasting geographic features such as large trees. Trees and other plants are also often enough used in place of granite or marble headstones in historically black cemeteries throughout the South. Certainly, a primary aspect of 'racial' injury inflicted on victims and survivors of enslavement, Jim Crow, and the contemporary regime of *de facto* 'racial' apartheid perpetuated by socioeconomic continuity of inequitable intergenerational transmission of capital in the U.S., is the denial or abbreviation of burial rights. In cases where the body is missing, desecrated, irrecoverable, abjected, unclaimed, or without descendants/ survivors empowered to conduct burial services, there is consequent social injury exactly because culturally sanctified burial ritual demands acknowledgement of black humanity, opens the door for epideictic on racial justice, and is generative of solidarity between survivors. For the decedent, last rites are reflective of the status and rights enjoyed while alive. Burial rites are a barometer of human rights in the context of U.S. racial formations.

It is a tragic irony that a central concern of Hurston's 1937 novel is the redemptive power of burial as a social ritual; protagonist Janie's 'putting up' of her lover Teacake's body in a conspicuous burial process helps to heal ruptures in the novel's small black Southern Florida community. Responding to Janie's murder trial after she shoots Teacake defending herself against his terminal rabidity and accompanying aggression, friends and associates initially judge Janie as guilty. However, after Janie's acquittal and the lavish burial procession for Teacake, Janie is validated by the larger community of

mourners for financing his honorific 'homegoing.' *The Color Purple* can be read as a narrative exhumation and re-interment of the body of black America's experience with community-based adaptations to violence, particularly the deadly effects of sexual violence. The scene of belated celebration of family bonds and reparable attachments in the cemetery between Alice Walker's characters Celie and Shug, two black women lovers in the mid-20th century South, is a pivotal event in the progression of the story. This is not only because Celie's identity is revised in the encounter with her dead, but more importantly her relationship to the living is consecrated on that ground.

This chapter explores the sentiment expressed by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in her poem 'Bury Me in a Free Land.' Written before emancipation, and then published in 1864, the poem from which this chapter draws its title is one in a series of pieces of deathart poetics written by African American women in the U.S. The first piece of orature eventually published in writing (1855) by an African in America is Lucy Terry's elegy 'Bar Fights,' which commemorated a 1746 battle between whites and Indians in Massachusetts, and among Phillis Wheatley's first published work (1770) is an elegy. Deathart in the form of elegy and eulogy, as well as other forms of funerary rhetoric have been enduring modes of African American expression in U.S. history; these expressions reflect too the lamentable conditions of black morbidity and burial - either explicitly as in Harper's work, or tacitly by demonstration of black humanity as with Terry or Wheatley -- and signify on the shared mortality of humans as evidence opposed to white supremacist mythology. The two novels read in this chapter use scenes of burial to illustrate the dynamics of gendered power relations in U.S. society. As interesting as the multiple graveside and burial scenes in both novels is the use of the narrative as a burial

ground, with language acting as the substrate, the memorial venue, and the commemorative vehicle for documenting conditions of black life and death. Hurston's use of Black English Vernacular, the representation of a black female protagonist Janie's identity transformation from loyal deathbed attendant fulfilling her grandmother's last wish that she wed, to a deathbed role-reversal renegade wherein Janie speaks her truth of having survived abusive dominance at the hands of her dying husband, to Hurston's representation of a successful funeral as the means for narrative closure, the language of the novel is experienced by the reader as a burial of one set of ethics and the invention of another at the graveside of the dependent and dehumanizing gender inequity being laid to rest by Hurston's story of an unapologetic independent black women in the early 20th century South. Walker's series of letters from protagonist Celie to God, Sister and Self read as the exhumation of an affirmed and livable black womanist identity. Within the narrative, the discovery of the symbolic burial site of letters written to Celie by her sister marks the major transition in power relations between husband and wife -- the exhumation of these letters from their resting place under the floor up-ends the dynamic of misogyny and abuse suffered by Celie. Celie's sister makes a discursive return from the dead once these letters are exhumed. Walker narrative use of Black English Vernacular resonates with Hurston's artistic choices and pay homage to the tradition of orature in African American deathart and burial rites.

Reading through the burial scenes first in *Eyes*, then the burial scenes in *Purple*, the co-incidences between burial-rights and burial-rites are explored in the order of ritual normative within black Southern women's death-poetics. These two novels adhere closely to the plum-line of African American deathart as political resistance to 'racial'

socioeconomic violences. Aesthetics, particularly expressive orature and spoken word forms of deathart, have been a resource for black social justice struggles. Death is a ritual resource that has been in abundance, tragically and unnaturally, to such an incomprehensible magnitude because of the mortality of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and U.S. slave-labor economy. Black morbidity in the process of labor commodification manifests in dis-ease for black women workers that is in anticipation of both ancestor and descendant attachment rupture. Knowledge that one will lose their mother, lose their child, is natural -- the loss will never be consensual -- there is no choice that death will happen. However, an unnatural rupture in attachment is often non-consensual but with alternative. It is this counter-factual alternative, the otherwise that might have been, which troubles the survivor testimonials from parents who've experienced the loss of a child, or adult children who've experienced extremely disordered attachment.

Hurston and Walker make thematic the importance of death ritual in African America's negotiation with institutionalized racism, response to language that is freighted with adverse connotations for black identity, and patriarchal franchise on a micro and macro level. A beautiful example explored later from *Purple* of the ways in which deathart is a resource for cultivating relationships with ancestor ambassadors through funerary ritual and thereby enhancing survivor status occurs in a burial scene that features a family's daughters performing as the pallbearers in the funeral of their mother.

Walker's representation of maternal interment by adult daughter's bearing the weight of the body is symbolic of a womanist vision of a world wherein daughters have continuity of primary attachment. *Purple* juxtaposes the intergenerational transmission of cultural property in the form of deathart, and the communication of financial capital and real

property in the antagonist Mr's family of patriarchs. Both novels represent the life-course of heroines that turn toward death and burial rites in order to claim and create identities that contravene patriarchal and racist social dictates. Marking the burial location, naming the decedent, conducting funerary rites that acknowledge and recognize the bereavement are essential aspects of black health for Janie and Celie. Hurston and Walker both represent disenfranchised grief, unrecognized mourning, and ambiguous loss as unlivable conditions: Janie mourns the loss of 'Self' and recovers it through the deathbed attendance and burial of her lover, and Celie mourns her Sister and her 'Self' and recovers it through the burial of her traumatic past at the cemetery holding her parents graves, as well as in the rebirth of her sister Nettie and children into black U.S. life. *Purples* closes with the remarkable return from presumed death at sea of Celie's entire family during a WWII trans-Atlantic crossing, a reminiscence on the Middle Passage.

The thanatope of burial is weighty in African American literature in part because of the absence of culturally appropriate funerary ritual at the unmarked graves of victims of enslavement, hostages of lynch-law and imprisonment, and those bearing the diagnosis of chronic disease correlated with social dis-easeses such as poverty, discontinuity in attachments, forced relocation, and racial violence. The politics of body disposal, quarantine, containment, contamination and cultural/spiritual expectations about treatment of the dead in body and name in these novels foregrounds the concurrent question of gendered power and the status of women as mourners, precedents, desedents, descendants, and ancestors. Complicating each novels's use of the burial thanatope is the rhetorical context of its production. *Eyes* is published in a cultural climate where a

national effort is without socially sanctioned ritual bereavement and mourning processes as occurs in the representations of maternal attachment rupture that were endemic to U.S. chattel slavery, appropriate funerary procession for the purpose of decedent transcendence to the status of ancestor, and thus the empowering of the living community of imagined inheritors of that continued attachment to increasingly powerful participants in the political community of enslaved, survivors and descendant.

Burial Practices

Racial segregation of burial practices is ubiquitous in the U.S. -- death practices and arts traffic across cultural / spiritual communities with adaptation along the way, but interment of the corpse and the pre-interment sanctification of the body and the ground retrospectively ascribe in perpetuity a racial identity on the decedent. Enacting the ritual of burial solidifies and recreates an imagined community of ancestors active in the life of surviving descendants construed broadly for mourners and witnesses. Death ritual, and funerary deathart accompanying burial rites are represented by every major literary figure in 20th century African American fiction.

Burial is significant because it argues for the humanity of the decedent. In U.S. history, the measure of white supremacist mythology, battled on the deathbed by Jefferson in *A Lesson Before Dying* as described in the previous chapter, can be taken by the treatment of the dead. At one's death, what remains places a demand on the living for recognition of shared humanity. Human corpses are transhistorically and cross-culturally treated as the legitimate bearers of inviolable claim to sacralization. Of course, there are innumerable examples throughout history where desecration of human remains has prevailed during periods of social violence. Where burial rites are refused, and normative

and culturally appropriate funerary process is fractured, particularly when corpses are missing or mutilated, the psychosocial cost to survivors and mourners is catastrophically high. An example of public grief and response to the question of unburied or missing bodies occurred in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Many black families in New Orleans experienced traumatic loss of loved ones that was compounded by the unidentified remains of bodies decomposing for a national audience due to the breakdown in public health services and coroner office preparedness. In the excerpt from Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel about conjugal bereavement and mother-loss in turn of the 20th century Southern black life, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the protagonist love-interest Teacake is conscripted into a Florida chain-gang by police in post-hurricane body clean-up crews. The theme of being taken hostage resonates with the deathbed scenes of novels read in previous chapters, from the men enslaved to Flo Hatfield in *Oxherding Tale*, the *Invisible Man* protagonist's hospital imprisonment, Ruby's death-sentence pounded out on the metaphorical coffin of her small house by the titular character of *Mama Day* in retribution for the curse placed on Ophelia -- confinement, hostage crises, incarceration, and imprisonment in both pre-mortem and post-mortem contexts. In the second excerpt from Alice Walker's critically acclaimed epistolary novel *The Color Purple* (1982) the protagonist Celie is reminded by her stepfather that victims of lynch law are refused burial rites. The event of execution, and the entire execution of the event of lynching, is hostage crisis; even the dead body and the decedent's posthumous recognition through burial rites is unsafe. Refusal of burial rites or posthumous recognition through commemorative memorials, tribute, or funerary observation is the final dehumanization and denial of humanity. The community of

survivors is refused the asset of an ancestor, and the decedent is deprived of posthumous continuity of name and identity through incorporation of their memory into the living community. Sacralized disposal, however thin or impoverished, or human remains is normative in human cultures. Conversely, refusal of sacralized disposal (whether by interment, incineration, desiccation, etc.) and desecration of the corpse by culturally abject treatment can be understood as primary forms of dehumanization and social disrespect.

Social disrespect is a diagnosis that has its own disease course, eventuating in resistance, efforts at recovery, palliative measures and ritual response in African American literary representations of white hubris toward unnatural black morbidity. Dying of unnatural causes, like execution or lynching, is a feature of black morbidity is responded to in burial ritual by erasure of the desecrated identity -- a cultural quarantine of the shame associated with lynching -- in examples like Celie's father being buried in an unmarked grave. Yet, as Celie points out, her mother is buried in an unmarked grave too, despite dying an early death of natural causes. Her grave is unmarked because the community of survivors were unable, or chose not to, observe funerary ritual. *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* explore the politics of burial and the symbolism of this ritual event for the consolidation and creation of beloved community within the context of social disrespect endemic to 'racial' formations in U.S. history. Death is the ultimate transformation in identity, social role, and for some, mortality is the definitional essential for human understanding of life as such. African American cosmological frames of reference undergird the practice of burial. Death rituals are demonstrative of social status and cosmological assumptions about the nature of life and

death. In both novels we see that competition and struggle between 'racial' groups is generative of a burial and funerary practices being utilized for contests involving segregation of social space and status.

African American writers in the 20th century have represented the sociolinguistic rituals of death with such rigour that the corpus of creative writing produced by these authors is a metaphorical sarcophagus. A container of deathart, the body of work produced by creative writers, poets, and political orators -- generally African American rhetors from across cultural eras and regional specificity -- is riddled with stories of diagnosis, dis-ease, the deathbed, and perhaps most prominently, the thanatope of burial. Burial is a process, a series of steps that follow a general pattern from posthumous dressing and body cleansing, waking with food and libations accompanied by storytelling about the decedent, mourning displays and prayer, community condolences and in-gathering of family in preparation for interment of the body, embalming if affordable with public display of the dressed corpse, eulogy, testimonial, prayer, singing, praise, and dance followed by interment of the body in with ritual mourners present *en mass*, and post-burial condolences to recognized grievers. Consolation of acute bereavement happens along this process, and continues after burial with community support for graveside attendance.

These scenes of survivor engagement with the corpse, the body, and the imagined posthumous identity of the decedent point to a prominent feature of African American 20th century fiction: the presence of the burial thanatope. Interment of the deceased is ubiquitous as a deathart in African American community. The ritual, symbolism and location of the grave is given considerable weight as a family and community life-event.

Funerary ritual associated with interment, from the being with the body in preparation, the wake, and transport to burial rights and bereavement steps to sanctify the gravesite, all signify on the history of African American mortality in the U.S. Conditions of morbidity described in earlier chapters - health disparities, racial violence, historical inequity, silencing of individual and community protest at the causes of death for African America -- are explored by Ellison, Johnson, Walker, Naylor, Gaines, Wideman.

In this chapter we're approaching the tale-end of the dying process. In some cosmologies, the death of the individual is not complete until their transcendent spirit has travelled some imagined distance. In the case of African America, the death of the individual, and their rebirth into the collective ancestry, only happens when survivors and descendants stop observing the steps of bereavement at the burial location. Visiting the dead, having certainty about the condition and location of the body, community viewing, congregation at the graveside, family visits to cemetery, waking with family and friends for several days of eating and community building around the home of the decedent, invoking the identities of the decedent's survivors reverentially -- these are components of the burial thanatope in African American literature. In the examples excerpted from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), the burial thanatope is intertextually relevant to the reader. The preface to *Eyes* notes, "Reading in an essay by a white folklorist that Hurston was buried in an unmarked grave, Walker decided that such a fate was an insult to Hurston and began her search for the grave to put a marker on it.

Digging the Grave, Opening the Ground

Hurston novel opens, “So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead. Not the dead of sick and ailing friends at the pillow and the feet. She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgement” (1) Society’s power structures are sharply revealed in the treatment of the dead: in *Eyes*, Hurston explores hegemonic power structures by tracking the consequences of buried and unburied objects in the life of a young girl, Janie. The absence of her presumed dead parents - her father an escaped rapist, her mother the missing victim - adversely influences the style of Janie’s attachment. Though gone, her parents are without graves leaving Janie without recourse for mourning. Though beloved by her maternal grandmother ‘Nanny,’ Janie is betrayed by Nanny’s deathbed wish that she marry without love, thus sexually, economically and spiritually enslaving her Self to a master figure. Janie thus loses the primary attachment to her Nanny, and makes the stark and dramatic decision not to visit the grave of her grandmother nor attend the burial ground. Hurston’s narrator voices a realistic response to trauma and the desire to bury or cover the wound of injury through some compensatory prophylaxis, which tragically has the opposite consequence for Nanny’s beloved granddaughter,.

“Ah couldn’t love yuh no more if Ah had uh felt yo’ birth pains mah-self. Fact uh de matter, Ah loves uy a whole heap more’n Ah do yo’ mama, de one Ah did birth. But you got to take in consideration you ain’t no everyday chile like most of’em. You ain’t got no papa, you might jus’ as well say no mama, for de good she do yuh. You ain’t got nobody but me. And ma head is ole and tilted towards de grave. neither can you stand alone by yo’self. De thought uh you bein’ kicked around from pillar tuh post is uh hurtin’ thing. Every tear you drop squeezes a cup

uh blood outa mah heart. Ah got tuh try and do for you befo' mah head is cold"
(15).

Janie's Nanny recalled to her the story of her near death at the end of the Civil War on a plantation in Savaannah. Nanny has birthed a child and is one-week postpartum when the plantation owner enters her room and sexually assaults her before he leaves to make a death stand against the Union troops. The next morning the plantation mistress enters her room and physically assaults her for birthing a clearly bi-racial child. The mistress says, "First thing in de mornin' de overseer will take you to de whippin' post and tie you down on yo' knees and cut de hide offa yo' yaller back. One hundred lashes wid a raw-hide on yo' bare back. Ah'll have you whipped till de blood run down to yo' heels! Ah mean to count de licks mahself. And if it kills you Ah'll stand de loss.

Anyhow, as sson as dat brat is a moonth old Ah'm going to sell it offa dis place" (18).

Racial segregation of burial, and the threat of withholding or desecrating the corpse is prominent in this scene. Thanatologist David Bruner has argued that on one level, burial practices can be perceived as analogues of the "social role(s) that an individual held life, such as kin group association, occupation, and other interest group affiliations. In a broader scope, the symbolism expressed in mortuary practices can be interpreted not only in terms of the relations between the living to the dead, but between the living as well"

(1). The degraded status of black women in life and death is evidenced by the vulnerability of Nanny to an ignoble death and post-mortem desecration on the plantation where she is hostage. Nanny flees to the swamp and lives there, reporting "Ah don't seehow come mah milk didn't kill mah chile, wid me so skeered and worried all de time" (18). Maternal anxiety and threats to attachment are risk factors for girls becoming

victims of sexual trauma. Hurston unburies the legacy of injury and morbidity associated with the logic of chattel enslavement in her treatment of Nanny's life story.

Rocking Janie in her lap while explaining her reasoning for asking Janie to marry a man she doesn't love for financial security before Nanny's death, Nanny tells her granddaughter the story of her mother's rape and her own conception. "One day she didn't come home at de usual time and Ah waited and waited...De next mornin' she come crawlin' in on her hands and knees. A sight to see. Date school tacher had done hid her id de woods all night long, and he had done raped mah baby...It was a long time before she was well, and by date time we knowed you was on de way. And after you was born she took to drinkin' likker and stayin' out nights...Lawd knows where she is right now. She ain't dead, 'cause Ah'd know it by mah feelings, but sometimes Ah wish she was at rest" (19). The horror of this experience for Nanny is deeply and profoundly traumatic. She tells Janie, "Ah can't die easy thinkin' maybe de menfolks white or black is makin' a spit cup outa you: Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie. Ah'm a cracked plate" (20). Janie feels obligated to fulfill the dying wish of her grandmother, however, she does so at the price of her own health and sense of self-coherence.

Janie marries the man that Nanny selects, but one day while he is out purchasing a mule for Janie to use to plow their fields, a man name Joe Starks happens by her home and Janie decides to run away with him. Starks is incredulous that Janie should be behind a plow, telling her that "A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters date other folks pant just special for you," (29). After nearly twenty years of marriage to Starks and life as the Mayor's wife after Starks is elected, another mule makes an appearance. Starks buys a mule that Janie sees being

worked to death to offer it respite. The mule dies of some unnatural mysterious cause in the middle of town later that week, at which point the town initiates an elaborate mock funeral without interment for the dead mule.

Hurston's language blurs between a description of the town inhabitants as vultures, mourners, and spectators. The identity of the flock of vultures with gruesome leader descend on the corpse in the end; being eaten by carrion is generally regarded as inhumane, but for other animals it is part of the natural 'circle of life,' so to speak. Hurston's coupling of the vulture flock and the town mourners at the mule's funeral foreshadows the death of Joe Starks. This minimal and insubstantial gesture of humility and love by Janie's second husband, Mayor Joe Starks - purchasing a nearly worked to death mule for \$5 does not move Janie toward greater intimacy or attachment to Starks. Instead, it becomes allegorical for Janie's sense of identity, self-worth and sense of coherence in her marriages. Stark prohibits Janie's attendance at the mock funeral for the town mascote/mule in the forest because he regards it as a lowly and profane activity with which he does not want her associated. The profanity is in mocking death: Hurston establishes in the opening paragraph of her novel her spiritual orientation toward 'Being' and mortality, writing:

"Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men." (1)

Conversational and tutorial, the narrator opens with a comparison of men and women's experience of mortality, "Now, women forget all those things they don't want

to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly," lavish praise for the transcendent power of ideation, imagination and memorial from Hurston for women's cognitive capacity here in this second paragraph of *Eyes* (1). Dreaming and living are conflated and intertwined in this set of conditions mapped by Hurston. She diagrams the contradictions in women and men's sources of identity, finding that for men's lives are binary and passive, spent watching the 'ships.' Ships here cannot help but carry a connotation linked to the trans-Atlantic passage and dreams of death held in that cultural memory.

Images of water, death and ships appear ever so frequently in African American creative writing. The trans-Atlantic voyage bears on North American black Christian burial practices in three ways. First, the drowning and water burial of non-survivors in that passage between Africa and the Americas is housed as a great cultural memory that is, like those un-commemorated victims, dissolved, diluted, dis-integrated, resorbed into the carbon cycle certainly, but unnamed or remembered in any location where their identities might serve a social purpose. At the end of *Eyes*, Hurston's character's find themselves confronted by a hurricane wherein African American residents of the Everglades find themselves trapped in dark, creaking, leaking small shacks, "their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at teh dark, but their eyes were watching God" (160). The social purpose of the dead as imagined agents in the life of the survivor community might include mediation of conflict through shared remembrance and respect, empathic and protective imagined presence, ambassadorship, reverential community recognition through memorial, and political appeal.

Speaking on behalf of the dead is a rhetorically powerful position -- the speakers attributions go uncontested. Survivors of the middle passage witnessed dying and suffering on an order of magnitude that is nearly unrepresentable, an argument that attends other such enormous and egregious violations of human rights -- times and places where social relations between perpetrator and victims were devoid of mutual human recognition. The argument that some atrocity is so traumatic such that all effort at representation is profane. *Purple* references and represents the Middle Passage allegorically in the transit of Celie's family back to North America and the possible trans-Atlantic loss of their ship, among other buried literary devices. *Eyes'* plot closure is brought about by a watery deluge -- the hurricane calamity contextualizing the dialogue in the above epigraph.

In sum, the first reason that water is a sign of death/passage/or portal in African American fiction is that the traumatic memory of the middle passage, the natal alienation, the social death, the liquidity of human recognition, the lack of foundation, the enormity and depth, the oceanic cartography of dismemberment --- all are exhumed and reburied at the level of the narrative and the level of the text in the rhetorical context of black life in North America during the 20th century. Crossing 'The River' as a metaphor of death has roots in Christian imagery as well as the experience of trans-Atlantic holocaust. Secondly, memories of the dead, and their continued presence as attachment figures in the lives of the mourners and survivors are a resource -- these memories provide the inheritor with a broader sense of intergenerational identity and self-coherence. Middle passengers, hostages, enslaved Africans, traumatized refugees -- all developed strategies to manage the death and dying during the trans-Atlantic voyage. Mortuary ritual,

funerary rites, and burial practices are opportunities for mourners to create social connections, maintain loyalty to a broader spiritual community, and to sustain attachments. Remembering the traumatic events of the Middle Passage with realism doesn't occur, rather, those burial rites and funerary practices for victims of the Middle Passage are conducted through deathart that makes oblique references in scenes with watery bodies.

Hurston and Walker's deathart argues that the loss of Self in the context of racism and patriarchy is the most significant threat to black women's health -- rupture of the bonds between mother and daughter are refracted in both novels through the lens of intergenerational sexual violence sanctioned by enslavement, Jim Crow and ongoing reproductive health inequities. Images of water and sexuality are also intertwined with African derived cosmologies that figure water as life-sustaining sign. Thirdly, imagined posthumous relations with the one's dead are healthy and normal responses to the survival of that person's memory in the mind of a shared discourse community. Family and community stories of the dead and shared naming produces political solidarity and a sense of spiritual empowerment. The dead are figured frequently as agents in the decisions or choices of characters in African American fiction, and burial grounds, cemeteries and graveyards are prominent *topos*. The thanatope of burial is inclusive of mass graves on former industrial agricultural death camp/plantations in the U.S. South, as well as burial in discourse through silence, obfuscation, and confabulation.

When Hurston unpacks the reasoning behind the protagonist Janie's Nanny's deathbed wish that Janie marry a much older man of Nanny's selection, we find an explanation of repeated, intergenerational sexual, behavioral and environmental assaults

on her health, all of which leave her traumatized with the preoccupation that her granddaughter will be victimized. Nanny's experience is so horrific that she expresses a philosophy toward death as a preferential option to living in a state of dishonored victimization or disgrace. Nanny narrates her life history for Janie, makes her deathbed demand, and invokes the necessity that Janie honor the last wish of her dying grandmother that Janie get married. Janie feels that her dream of mutual desire and respect dies with marriage, and that she is reborn a woman, "She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman," (25). After Nanny sends Janie back to her first husband with the advice that Janie be grateful for the 60 acres of land, Hurston describes Nanny's deathbed in terms that have connotations of fluidity and water. The narrator shares, "There is a basin in the mind where words float around on thought and thought on sound and sight. Then there is a depth of thought untouched by words, and deeper still a gulf of formless feelings untouched by thought. Nanny entered this infinity of conscious pain again on her old knees," and she remains this way until the next morning. "She scuffled up from her knees and fell heavily across the bed. A month later she was dead," (25). Nanny had exhumed the history of her own trauma, and suffered a reactionary and defensive strategy of maternal protection that actually injures Janie's dignity and humanity. The sources of her demand that Janie marry a man in order to avoid the injury of social humiliation associated with the systemic environmental factors perniciously impacting black women's sexual health. Sexuality and reproductive health are at the center concepts not about disease and illness, but moreover about the motivation for Being and the cause of the concept of Self. In the history of black women's negotiations with health disparities and deleterious

psychosocial factors, death and disease have been coupled with sexual and reproductive health in the history of U.S. chattel enslavement.

By the second chapter of the novel, Hurston has given us a protagonist with an inheritance of intergenerational survivorship of race-based sexual violence, a woman inherently experiential in self-definition, without recognition as the descendant of shared dead, a person isolated and dependent eventually on her identification and attachment to her husband that his death sets her free. “She knew that God tore down the old world every evening and built a new one by sun-up....She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie’s first dream was dead, so she became a woman” (25). Hurston structures the novel around a sequence of romantic involvements between the protagonist and black men that are challenged by the prospect of their own mortality, all attempting to enjoy post-Emancipation liberties such as capital accumulation, while at the same time dominating Janie. Her first husband, ‘Mr. Killicks’ - an appropriate name given that Janie feels that being married to him is killing her -- leaves one day to purchase a mule in order that Janie learn to plow after deciding he is going to cease ‘spoiling’ her. He is significantly older and purchases Janie from Janie’s grandmother with the promise of financial security and protection. Janie decides to leave him on the same day that Mr. Killicks is traveling to retrieve the mule. Working in the yard cutting up tubers, Janie sees a man dressed in urban clothing with the comportment of a ‘Mr. Washburn,’ the white man whose family Nanny and Janie worked for prior to her marriage to Killicks. The man stops after Janie attracts his attention with her ‘long hair’ (27). Their conversation is revelatory of the importance of the dead as moderators of identity, continuity of attachment with the dead is a protective factor against adverse and disempowering social

relations in *Eyes*, and conversely, alienation and disidentification with the dead leave one vulnerable. The following dialogue from the scene that initiates the romantic involvement between Janie and Starks is illustrative of the dynamic whereby the absence of the dead as actors in the decision making of the living is influential. Had Janie the certainty of her parents death with accompanying burial ritual, and a place to foster continuity of posthumous attachment such as the gravesite, she would have access to the invocation of her parents names and thus some measure of protection from the predation of Joe Starks. Janie's isolation and socially disenfranchised grief at the loss of her parents because of their ambiguous status leaves her vulnerable.

The narratorial voice sets up Starks as circling in on Janie's accessibility at the tail-end of his inspirational and attractive description of his own dreams and ambitions to become 'big' in a new 'all colored' town. Hurston is skeptical in her narrative of the possibility of utopia - the town ends up being a place where the dead are socially disrespected -- the inhabitants are presented as vultures scavenging on the corpse of a worked to death mule by Hurston. This scene with the dead mule comes at the end of Janie's marriage to Starks, before his death. The opening of their relationship also involves a mule; Hurston's comparison of Janie's identity with that of the mule is a literary choice that portrays black women as 'beasts of burden' in white supremacist U.S. society, as well as within black community life. The day Starks, a man whose personality Hurston writes as entirely consistent with the psychopathology of intimate partner abusers, meets Janie they exchange dialogue: "Where was Janie's papa and mama?" 'Dey dead, Ah reckon. Ah wouldn't know 'bout 'em 'cause mah Grandma raised me. She dead too.'

‘She dead too! Well, who’s lookin’ after a lil girl-chile lak you?’

‘Ah’m married.’

‘You married? You ain’t hardly old enough to be weaned. Ah betcha you still craves sugar-tits, doncher?...Where yo’ husband at, Mis’ er-er.’(28)

Janie is wary of Starks at first as “the memory of Nanny was still powerful and strong,” yet Janie’s betrayal by Nanny -- Nanny’s decision to trade her to Killicks and the use of deathbed invective to bind Janie into a life without love -- alienates her from the potential posthumous attachment to an ancestor that might have empowered Janie to see herself as self-possessed, rather than as chattel to a husband.

Starks convinces Janie to leave with him for the purpose of founding an all black community. Her decision to leave Killicks is quickened by his choice to castigate her by disrespecting the dead. Upon learning of Janie’s plans to leave him, Killicks dishonors Janie’s mother and grandmother as the cause of her assumed sexual misconduct. Janie response, “wasn’t even angry. Logan was accusing he rof her mamma, her grandmama and her feelings, and she couldn’t do a thing about any of it”(32). Janie’s acceptance of her inability to change the identity of her dead, or disaffiliate with the history of sexual exploitation that Killicks references to shame her, becomes the catalyst for emboldening her departure from Killicks 60 acres and a mule. Thinking, “from now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything,” Janie rides off with Starks to the new town Green Clover Springs. She finds her self less lucky than she anticipates over the course of a 20 year abusive marriage.

The ‘yellow mule’ that is a town mascot/spectacle in Green Clover Springs is symbolic of Janie’s status -- she is on display at the her husband’s store as unpaid laborer.

Starks routinely humiliates Janie in public by screaming, belittling and speaking in an ‘ungodly’ manner that others notice. But the town enjoys watching her frustration and forced labor routine under the abusive reign of her husband. Janie’s health is devastated by the psychological and physical toll of her abusive marriage. Because the “store itself kept her with a sick headache” was “such a waste of life and time”(54). One day, the yellow mule tries to escape capture by his owner in front of the store Starks owns. “Five or six more men left the porch and surrounded the fractious beast, goosing him in the sides and making him show his temper. But he had more spirit left than body. He was soon panting and heaving from the effort of spinning his old carcass about. Everybody was having fun at the mule-baiting,” except Janie who thinks, “They oughta be shamed uh theselves! Teasin date poor brute beast lak they is! Done been worked tuh death; done had his disposition ruint wid mistreatment, and now they got tuh finish devlin’ im tuh death. Wisht Ah had mah way wid’em ah” (56). Janie has suffered social death in abusive silence of her marriage. She has no connection to her family, to her dead, to the living community. Her identity has been buried under layers of silence and abusive social relations - she has been ‘ruint wid mistreatment’ too and empathy.

Offered five dollars by Starks for the abused, starved, and overworked mule, the owner sells him, saying “Date mule been wid me twenty-three years. It’s mighty hard”(57). Once Starks pays the five dollars the former owner laughs and mocks Starks, “Date mule is liable tuh be dead befo’ de week is out. You won’t git no work outa him” (58). Indeed, “but way after a while he [mule] died...found him under the big tree on his rawbony back with all four feet up in the air. That wasn’t natural and it didn’t look right, but Sam said it would have been more unnatural for him to have laid down on his side

and died like any other beast. He had seen Death coming and had stood his ground and fought it like a natural man” (58-59). Hurston’s commentary on the treatment of the mule pre-mortem and post-mortem references the history of black women’s bondage during enslavement, and the persistence of captivity, uncompensated and forced labor within the patriarchal family. The thanatology produced by Hurston is one that casts death as a natural event and inevitable event that ought motivate the cultivation of love and intimacy in a beautifully lived life. Respect for human mortality is anchored by the certainty of death, and the imagery of the cycle of seasons is coupled with discussion of the natural human life cycle in the novel. But, the mule’s death is an unnatural one -- the degraded and disrespected status of the mule is fully evidenced only in the disgraced social event where Starks, “stood on the distended belly of the mule for a platform,” for his self-aggrandizing speech. Hurston’s use of the mule as allegory on black women’s experience is a type of discursive burial, and covering of the body of shared and inherited knowledge with language.

The story becomes a kind of coffin or container for the legacy of unrecognized grief and social disrespect experienced by black women in the U.S. South. Specifically, the mule’s sale after 23 years of labor and the characterization of the mule as ‘mean’ ‘ornery’ and generally lazy rather than aged or infirm is symbolic of the sale or trade of black elders, and in particular older women during slavery. Betrayal of the mule is completed when the town uses the carcass as a platform for mock funerary rites, afterwhich the narratorial voice describes, “everybody enjoyed themselves to the highest and then finally the mule was left to the already impatient buzzards. They were holding a great flying-meet way up over the heads of the mourners and some of the trees were

already peopled with the stoop-shouldered forms,” and then the birds commence their own funeral service. The scene has the vultures collectively chant:

“Who killed this man?”

‘Bare, bare fat.’

‘What killed this man?’

‘Bare, bare fat.’

‘Who’ll stand for his funeral?’

‘We!!!’ (62)

The leader of the vultures then exclaims, “Well all right now” and, “picked out the eyes in the ceremonial way and the feast went on. The yaller mule was gone from the town except fo the porch talk, and for the children visiting his bleaching bones now and then in the spirit of adventure” (62). It is interesting that Hurston chooses that the mule be male and quite pointedly calls him a ‘natural man.’ Pronoun choice further buries the the story of black women’s exploited labor within the story, wrapping the history in a parable on humility, injustice and posthumous rights.

Janie feels her self-coherence disintegrating over the course of her marriage to Starks.

“She wasn’t petal-open anymore with him. She was twenty-four and seven years married when she knew. She found that out one day when he slapped her face in the kitchen,” and Janie finds that her marriage “bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in” (71). Later at the store one of the customers remarks to Starks that, “If dat wuz *mah* wife...Ah’d kill her cemetery dead” (74). The disposal of the dead indicates the beliefs of a culture and community, especially when the dead individual also represented the society as a whole. Janie represents domesticated black femininity beholden to the

mandates and labor routine of her husband -- she would be worthy of a burial in a cemetery if murdered by her husband. However, were her death to be caused by an 'unnatural' cause, like the yellow mule who died after manumission from servitude earlier in the novel, Janie would not be worthy of burial rites.

As Joe ages he begins to lose some of his psychological control over Janie; infirmity and atrophy take their toll on Joe's physical stamina. "There was already something dead about him....Jody must have noticed it too. Maybe, he had seen it long before Janie did, and had been fearing for her to see. Because he began to talk about her age all the time," however the psychological devaluing loses some of its power as Janie realizes the noxious motivations behind her husband's discourse. She confronts him and he strikes her with all his power. They begin to sleep in separate rooms at home and Joe's health deteriorates; Janie "noticed how baggy Joe was getting all over. Like bags hanging from an ironing board. A little sack hung from the corner of his eyes and rested on his cheek-bones...a sack of flabby something hung from his loins and rested on his thighs when he sat down," and rumors spread that Janie had cursed her husband. She learns from a friend that, "it's been signin' round here ever since de big fuss in de store date Joe was 'fixed' and you wuz de one dat did it"(82). Hurston's description of the dynamics of an abusive marriage are mapped onto the politics of healthcare providers in Jim Crow medical practice. Joe is being treated by a root-doctor whose diagnosis for Joe is that his wife is trying to kill him. Janie contracts with an establishment medical doctor who offers Joe a terminal prognosis. Hurston's philosophy on death and dying becomes explicit in the narrator's personification of Death:

“So Janie began to think about Death. Death that strange being with the huge square toes who lived way in the West. The great one who lived in the straight house like a platform without sides to it, and without a roof. What need has Death for a cover, and what winds can blow against him? He stands in his high house that overlooks the world. Stands watchful and motionless all day with his sword drawn back, waiting for the messenger to bid him come” (84).

Joe refuses to see either Janie or a medical doctor, preferring instead to work with the root-doctor who had diagnosed him as ‘fixed.’ On his deathbed Joe shares with his best friend Sam that he believes that he will be cured once he, “found what had been buried against him”(84). In African derived thanatologic practices, interment of human remains is normative, and interment of other ritual objects is a practice that is associated with the power of the dead and the capacity of one to hide, hold in reserve, transport, or return resources, assets, and social relations. Janie finally enters Joe’s room against his will to be at his deathbed. Joe protests Janie’s assertion that he is dying:

“Janie! Janie! don’t tell me Ah got tuh die, and Ah ain’t used tuh thinkin’ bout it.’

‘Tain’t really no need of you dying, Body, if you had of - de decotor -- but it don’t do no good bringin’ dat up now...’

‘Leave heah, Janie. Don’t come heah --’

‘Ah knowed you wasn’t gointuh lissen tuh me. You changes everything but nothin’ don’t change you -- not even death. But Ah ain’t goin’ outa herea dn Au ain’t gointuh hush.

Naw, you gointuh listen tuh me one time befo’ you die...Listen, Jody, you ain’t de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You’s whut’s left after he died...’

‘Shut up! Ah wish tuhunder and lightin’ would kill yuh!’

After some more arguing, Joe stops breathing and Janie sits with his dead body. The burial and funeral are reminiscent of the mock mule-burial. The finality of her abusive husband's death motivates Janie to begin to think about her own life and death. "She asked [herself] if she wanted to leave and go back where she had come from and try to find her mother. Maybe tend her grandmother's grave. Sort of look over the old stamping ground generally. Digging around inside of herself like that she found that she had no interest in that seldom-seen mother at all. She hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years....She hated the old woman who had twisted her so into the name of love" (89). Ongoing public debate over the status, treatment, and location of the dead brings into sharp focus African America's efforts to change longstanding social and economic conditions through mortuary services. Janie's rejection of her grandmother's burial site is a radical departure from the typical representation of beloved foremothers in the majority of African American women's writing. Hurston rejects and demotes the dead whose last wishes are injurious to the living. Both Joe Starks and Nanny receive harsh treatment by Hurston at the level of the narrative and the text. Neither character is accorded ongoing burial rites or 'tending.'

Janie moves from her black garb to white mourners clothing in the small black community, but feels continuously judged and pressured to conduct herself in accordance with standards of bereavement that are inauthentic. Nine months after her second husband Starks is buried Janie begins an affair and moves to Florida with a gambler twelve years her junior. He is a present-minded, confident and somewhat reckless person with a generosity toward others. Janie accepts that he is involved in illicit gambling with dangerous knife-wielding associates, and she decides to join his social life. Whereas in

her marriage to Starks, Janie was socially dead -- she was bereaved of Self -- in her relationship with Tea cake Hurston represents two characters whose gender identities and cultural participation are counter-hegemonic. Hurston's Harlem Renaissance influences can be seen in the lauding of black rural proletariat community life. Janie's 'sick headache' recedes and her feelings of anxiety, anger and fear about her own mortality dissapate in the 'much,' the Everglades community where the novel ends. Hurston ends the novel with Teacake's funeral and Janie's return to Green Clover.

After their relocation to Florida, Tea cake and Janie integrate into the local 'muck' life of dancing, communal cook-outs, gambling, fighting, singing, playing music, and other forms of social bonding. Yet, Janie's vulnerability to intimate partner violence persists, as does the propensity of the men with whom she becomes involved to justify and rationalize violence against her. In the following description, Hurston's language evidences that erotic charge and apologetics evoked by intimate partner violence in black community life. As a solution to ongoing rounds of attachment anxiety and jealousy between he and Janie, "Tea Cake had a brain storm. Before the week was over he had whipped Janie...No brutal beating at all. He just slaped her around a bit to show he was boss...It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted and pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her made the women see visions and the helpless way she [Janie] hung on him made men dream dreams" (147). A friend in the Muck, Sop-de-Bottom tells Tea Cake that he is "sho a lucky man...Uh person can see every place you hit her [Janie]...Take some uh dese ol' rusty black women and dey would fight yuh all night long and next day nobody couldn't tell you every hit'em. Dat's de reason Ah done quit beatin' mah woman...Lawd! wouldn't Ah love tuh whip uh tender

woman lak Janie”(148). Social discourses generative of racist and sexist mythology in the U.S. compete to fill the gap left by the death of the Self that Janie suffers in succumbing to the pattern of intimate partner violence traced by Hurston in *Eyes*. Despite the repetition of patterns of intimate partner violence that occur in Janie and Tea Cake’s marriage, Hurston construes their relationship as a positive and rehabilitative one for Janie. In the grip of the hurricane, Tea Cake asks Janie, ““Spousing you wuz tuh die, now. You wouldn’t git made at me for draggin’ yuh heah?” to which Janie answers, “People don’t die till dey time come nohow, don’t keer where you at. Ah’m wid mah husband in uh storm, dat’s all” (160). However, the storm is more than a simple hurricane -- the imagery of water and the people ‘watching God’ as the forces of nature bear down on them is an example of the burial in language of the cultural memory of trans-Atlantic passage. Hurston examines the discursive layers of memory that cover explicit reference to that passage, adding another layer of language herself with the abstraction voiced by the character Tea Cake, “the water had given life to lots of things that folsk think of as dead and given death to so much that had been living things. Water everywhere” (160). Janie and Tea Cake ride out the storm together, encountering “a dead man in a sitting position on a hummock entirely surrounded by wild animals and snakes,” as they “approached the city of refuge” after being refused sanctuary on higher ground by malicious whites (166). When they finally find a place to sleep, Janie shares with Tea Cake that, “Once upon uh time, Ah never’spected nothin, Tea Cake, but bein’ dead fromt eh standin’ still and tryin’ tuh laugh. Then you come ‘long and made somethin’ outa me” (168). Janie continues to attribute her identity and escape from the grave of her former marriage to Tea Cake, in spite of his battering her.

We opened this chapter with an epigraph from one of the last chapter of *Eyes*, a scene bracketed between Tea Cake's soon to be fatal bite by a rabid dog during the height of the hurricane, and his own funeral. The narratorial voice of *Eyes* becomes thanatologically contemplative, sharing with the reader that after the storm, "Him-with-the-square-toes had gone back to his house. He stood once more and again in his high flat house without sides to it and without a roof with his soulless sword standing upright in his hand. His pale white horse had galloped over waters, and thundered over land. The time of dying was over. It was time to bury the dead" (168). Hurston's personification of death hybridizes African and Native American imagery with Christian metaphors. The God that the people watch, symbolized by the storm, harbors this character of death -- Death is a character that feels powerful and comfortable in the presence of water and God. When Tea Cake and Janie have a few days rest and recovery after the abatement of the water, he chooses to have search out a better location for respite than the infested and dilapidated housing, only to be conscripted into a forced burial crew.

Janie warns Tea Cake that, "Dey's grabbin' all de menfolks dey kin git dey hands on and makin' 'em help bury de dead. Dey claims dey's after de unemployed, but dey ain't bein' too particular about whether you'se employed or not. You stay in dis house" Janie advises (169). However, Tea Cake decides to search for more suitable housing anyway and is, as Janie predicted, taken hostage by local deputies as a grave digger. "Tea Cake found that he was part of a small army that had been pressed into service to clear the wreckage in public places and bury the dead. Bodies had to be searched out, carried to certain gathering places and buried. Corpses were not just found in wrecked houses. they were under houses, tangled in shrubbery, floating in water, hanging in trees, drifting

under wreckage. Trucks lined with drag kept rolling in...each with its load of twenty-five bodies. SOme bodies fully dressed, sme naked and some in all degrees of dishevelment...Miserable, sullen men, black and white under guard had to keep on searching for bodies and digging graves. A huge ditch was dug across the white cemetery and a big ditch was opened across the black graveyard,” (170). Interestingly, Hurston juxtaposes the racially integrated grave-digging crew with the racially segregated burials.

Society’s power structures are sharply revealed in the treatment of the dead: in *Eyes*, Hurston explores hegemonic power structures by tracking the consequences of buried and unburied objects in the life Janie. The absence of her presumed dead parents, for example - her father an escaped rapist, her mother the missing victim - adversely influences the style of Janie’s attachment. Though gone, her parents are without graves leaving Janie without recourse for mourning. Though beloved by her maternal grandmother ‘Nanny,’ Janie is betrayed by Nanny’s deathbed wish that she marry without love, thus sexually, economically and spiritually enslaving her Self to a master figure. Janie thus loses the primary attachment to her Nanny, and makes the stark and dramatic decision not to visit the grave of her grandmother nor attend the burial ground. Burial practices do not merely register societal change but may also provide the very arena where social norms are first contested. Bonds between family members are premised on ancestral graves that allow access to the ancestors and thus symbolize the family's continuity and power. Hereditary relationships take root in the burial grounds, and create enduring relationships for graveside visitors. Death ends a person’s life, but burial provides a final display of a person’s social significance. The social contestations that determine the nature of the ceremony freight the event with powerful energy that

persists as history. The demand by the deputies that the corpses of hurricane victims be categorized by race, and that victims categorized as white be buried with greater mortuary attention is reflective of the history of whites using burial practices as a point of leverage to enact and consolidate 'racial' power.

Hurston exhumes the experiences of black women in U.S. history in the opening and examination of Janie's three marriages, each like a coffin where her protagonist's identity and Self is buried alive. Janie uses the death of her third husband Tea Cake to stage resistance against the dehumanization of this history; Hurston reverses the dynamics of mortuary practice as deterministic of social status. Instead of Janie being disempowered by the death of her third husband, her role as his deathbed attendant and her sponsorship of his lavish burial and wake confirm her as a powerful member of the living community. In this third relationship, Janie faces her own mortality by choosing to remain with Tea Cake as the disease course of rabies becomes more dangerous and Tea Cake begins to have extreme cognitive distortions and violent outbursts. Harkening back to Janie's second marriage and her receipt of a terminal diagnosis for Joe Starks. Janie listens as the doctor explains of Tea Cake's illness,

"That was a made dawg bit yo' husband. it's too late to get hold of de dawg's head. But de symptoms is all there. It's migh bad dat it's gone on so long. Some shots right after it happened would have fixed him right up.'

'You mean he's liable tuh die, doctah?'

'Sho is. But de worst thing is he's liable tuh suffer somethin' awful befo' he goes.' (177).

She declines to have Tea Cake placed in a hospital and decides to nurse him in their space of refuge, however, Tea Cake's jealousy returns with a vengeance once his mind is

in the fevered and hallucinatory grip of the disease. In self defense Janie shoots Tea Cake, is put on trial for his murder, is acquitted, and buries her third husband. "Janie buried Tea Cake in Palm Beach. She knwo he loved the 'Glades but it was too low for him to lie with water maybe washing over him with every heavy rain...the 'Glades and its waters had killed him. She wanted him out of the way of storms, so she had a strong vault built inthe cemetery at West Palm Beach," spending the money she inherited with the death of her second husband (189). "The Undertaker did a handsome job and Tea Cake slept royally on his white silken couch among roses...Janie bought him a brand new guitar and put it in his hands...then the band played, and Tea Cake rode like a Pharaoh to his tomb," concluding the ritual burial rites (190). Examining the successive metaphorical burials of Self in abusive relationships with men had by Hurston's protagonist, alongside the burial scenes, it can be perceived that interment and containment of trauma are prominent themes in *Eyes*. The conditions of burial, whether dignified or ignoble, are revelatory of and consistent with the social structures and power relations of the living community of survivors. *Eyes* ends with Janie back home in Clover Green in her bedroom that once was like a coffin, but is also figured as an ocean where Janie is able to sustain a posthumous attachment to the dead Tea Cake, "of course, he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. This kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see," (193). In this final paragraph, Hurston argues through the experience of her character Janie that black women's sexuality is a resource related to both life and death -- burial of

the Self in unfulfilling relationships is antithetical to the survivor ethics expressed by Nanny. However vilified, the survivor ethos of the character Nanny include burying trauma in language, embracing the gendered ‘coffin’ of social confinement in marriage as preferable to being preyed on by metaphorical vultures, and the desire to die with peace of mind. Earlier in the novel Janie faults her grandmother for drawing in the possible ‘horizon’ of her granddaughter’s potential to a loveless marriage -- an event represented as Janie being buried alive and trapped in a coffin to satisfy her grandmother’s dying wish. The audience is left with the possibility that Janie will reconcile too with her dead Nanny and enjoy the posthumous attachment with both her grandmother and husband during the course of inventing a new Self.

The Color Purple

The intertextual cascade of references to Zora Neal Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* are abundant. Walker intersects Hurston’s use of dialect, intergenerational maternal attachment, discussion of black women’s reproductive and sexual health, the burial and exhumation of Self, and burial as a community resource. The plot of each novel revolves around the coming of age and life-course of black women living in the Jim Crow South in the early 20th century. The protagonist’s imagined death bed considerations on the meaning of life with liberty and the questions of justice and freedom point toward Walker’s inheritance of Hurston. Walker’s protagonist is the oldest child, Celie, in the home of a woman whose Self and dignity have been abrogated by an abusive husband. Celie does not realize until retrospection and adult questioning of traumatic childhood events that the abusive husband is not her biological father, but rather her step father. The stepfather is a figure

without identity other than as an abuser. Walker differentiates him from the character of Mr., the man that, much like Joe Stark in *Eyes*, takes Celie from her family of origin as a domestic servant and object of continuous potential sexual violence. Celie is a childhood sexual abuse survivor; her stepfather rapes her and she births two children as in the course of her adolescence by him, which he promptly responds to by alienating her from them through forced adoption to a family on their way to Africa for missionary work. Celie is additionally traumatised in the formation of healthy attachments in her family of origin by the rupture in her relationship with her Sister Nettie, who is driven out of Celie's home by her abusive 'master' figure husband 'Mr.' when Nettie rejects Mr.'s sexual advances. Through the course of the novel, told in an epistolary style with Celie writing (a skill that tropes on the slave narrative's testimonial work), letters as she moves through a funerary process of Self exhumation, and reburial of trauma. Walker's protagonist succeeds and survives the trauma and abuse, forming a safe and robust attachment to her life-partner Shug Avery in a triangle with her husband Mr. -- a character who transforms into Albert after his rehabilitation in his own funerary procession and mourning.

In the novel Hurston's protagonist, Janie, buries her lover with all the pomp and decadence that she can afford for the sake of justice to the decedent, herself and the larger community. There is a burial scene in *Purple* that is substantial and similarly festive in 'homegoing' tradition. However, Walker's linguistic burial of the history of the trans-Atlantic trade is deeper, the grave more monumental than *Eyes*. The ceremony of paying respect to the dead and establishing just social relations through death ritual continued beyond the text when in 1973 Alice Walker went to commemorate Hurston's life and

memorialize her in death. Walker's 1982 novel *The Color Purple* reverberates with the life affirming potential of death ritual, as when the characters Celie and Shug commit themselves to one another as one another's "peoples" in a climactic scene in the local cemetery. Though this moment in the plot of *The Color Purple* has not received adequate critical attention, it is nonetheless a pivotal juncture in Celie's identity formation. The cemeteries landscape provides the grounds upon which Celie and Shug establish a new level of intimacy and social bond. Thanatological discourse practices in the cemetery landscape establish intertextual correlations with the social status and identity that decedents enact in their lives, so that for example, Celie learns that her father is buried in the unmarked grave reserved for lynching victims, and in fact, the unmarked grave is a significant trope throughout the source material interpreted in this dissertation. Beyond the individual social roles of a decedent are the symbolic meanings inherent in the cemetery landscape for the entire affiliated group. The symbolism of the cemetery landscape and the discourse practices therein can be understood as signifying liaisons between the living and the dead as well as relationships between the bereaved and the larger community in which they live.

Testimonial Literature on Death and Burial

Based on the strength of intertextual references to the trope of burial in WPA interviews and 20th century 'neoslave' narratives such as *Eyes* and *Purple*, this chapter argues that funerary rites (and wrongs) experienced by enslaved people were foundational to the formation of community identity and enabling of Self. Funerals, which include both the wake and burial, appear as moments of political mobilization and community identity formation, which in turn make possible the refusal of the racial order,

as well as the occasion for the reinterpretation public and private power relations. Struggles over how, when and where to bury the dead surface as matters of contention interracially and intraracially .

These novels comment on the phenomenon whereby, in the shadow of enslavement, the very existence of, as well as names for, African and African American burial grounds have been heavily disputed. In a move that feeds back into the central dissertation thesis, I show how the novels themselves serve as symbolic ‘burial sites,’ which overcome the problem of unmarked graves and unrecovered bodies. Denial and destruction of graves by perpetrators and those complicit with mass murder is a common trend in cases of War Crimes and genocide, hence, symbolic burial offers an important alternative to a physical location. As one freedman, Richard Jones, recalled in his testimony to a WPA worker, knowledge of a father’s grave provided an uncontested physical link to the history of slavery. Jones’ recounted how upon his father’s death, “he [was] buried at Presbyterian Cemetery as white folks calls it, but we calls it Cedar Grove” (Jones, 193). Intergenerational identification of the name and location of ancestral burial sites is common among the WPA narratives, and those sites allow slavery’s survivors and critics to speak from a place of authority. The burial trope in 20th century African American fiction frequently appears as the opportunity for critique of racial injustice and evidences resistance to dehumanization wrought by grave desecration and corpse mutilation, two typical features of the burial trope.

Mutilation of the Dead Body in the Burial Trope

In 1849 an antebellum Southern physician, after making his visit to a plantation, made note of a strategy used by the owner to capitalize on the thanatological ritual life

and community orientation toward death present in 19th century black life. Recognizing the import placed on posthumous integrity by workers on the plantation, the owner motivated by the avaricious desire to retain assets “employ[ed] mutilation as a tool of intimidation” to “deter dirt eating among their enslaved laborers by decapitating the bodies of those who died from this habit” (Fett, 157). Starving people hunger enough to stretch out their own death in order to assuage the experience of chronic malnutrition under slavery were further abused in death so that their survivors would suffer the horror of witnessing desecration of dead bodies. The effectiveness of the method was impressed upon the doctor, who noted that “the negroes have the utmost horror and dread of their bodies being treated in this manner” (Fett, 157). Revisiting this historical moment offers us one example of the dispersed etiology of contemporary North American black thanatology. The journey toward death for most enslaved people was a prolonged and tortured surety, which could be made all the more harder with the foreknowledge that one’s body would be posthumously violated or dismembered. In this scenario, the dying was not able to make that journey with the consolation that they would be afforded a proper burial.

Solace for survivors through commemorative cemetery visits, and proximity to the loved ones’ graves is a prominent theme. The texts show that for survivors of mass death and large scale catastrophe, emotional and psychological injury resulting from denied communion with the dead deepens the trauma. When heightened by cultural expectations that one should be able to pay respects, the denial of access to the grave sites of the deceased can work as a continuous source of grief. For example, Susan Boggs, interviewed in Canada in 1863 after his escape from slavery in Virginia, shared with the

interviewer that he and other survivors of slavery in exile would “like to travel back there if we live, but I don’t think we will ever live to go back. We would like to see our old friends and kindred. I would just like to walk over the ground where my father and mother are buried” (Blassingame, 421). In social histories with such wide spread destruction of life and devastation of familial ties through forced removal, relocation and incarceration as occurred under chattel slavery in the U.S., the presence of unmarked graves stands as evidence that survivors were left without the respite of a loved one’s grave over which to mourn. For example, in 1921 Catherine Beale, a 91 year old survivor of slavery recalled that once sold away from her own mother at the age of 11 in Virginia, that she “come to a river...it was on a Sunday we rested...one woman named Rosetta died. She had a little baby, an’ she died an’ they buried her side the road that Sunday. They brought the little baby on with’em an’ another woman nursed it, but it died before we got to Macon” (Blassingame, 575). Rosetta and her child’s bones were left unmarked, and their bodies are remain interred along a river side road in South Carolina. Whether Rosetta and her infant’s extended kinship network ever learned of her demise and location is dubious. What happened to those kin who quite possibly saw their family members disappeared and never were able to learn the location of their bodies? We see in this body of literature the repeated desire to have closure through knowledge of the final resting place of loved ones, a desire to visit the burial site and give homage to the dead through grave side ritual.

Funerary Ritual and the Recognition of Social Injustice

Funerals are the location of power contests between the living and the dead, as well as the stage for intra, interpersonal and intergroup negotiations over status. At 115

years old, freedman Willis Winn recollected the injustice of coerced funerary observance on the plantation where he was enslaved in Louisiana, “When some of the white folks died every nigger on the place had to go to the grave and walk round and drop in some dirt on him” (Yetman, 332). Winn juxtaposed the coerced funeral participation at the death of whites with the dehumanizing lack of ritual observance allowed the enslaved, “They [enslavers] buried the niggers any way. Did a ditch and cover’em up” (Yetman, 332). Despite this dehumanizing practice that sought to obliterate the memory of the dead, Winn’s 1936 testimony that he would be able to “show you [WPA interviewer] right now down in Louisiana where I was raised, forty acres was nothin’ but niggers buried on’em” demonstrates that the practice did not succeed. Instead, we can read Winn’s testimony as telling of the ways in which human remains remain in the ‘right now’ when the burial site is remembered. Human remains in postslavery narrative, as in this case, work as evidence that great wrongs have transpired, as well as providing the grounds from which social justice arguments may powerfully emerge. At 121, North Carolinian ex-slave Sarah Gudger shared her memory of divine justice after having been denied her right to visit the dead body of her mother before burial by her owner. Gudger told her the plantation mistress that “my mother died today. I wants to see my mother afore dey puts her away,” but the ‘Ole Missie’ rebuked Gudger and for asking and forced her to return to laboring in the field on pain of physical punishment (Yetman, 152). Gudger “went back to work, with tears streamin down [her] face” and “just a-ringin’ [her] hands” because she “wanted to see [her] mammy so” (Yetman, 152). Gudger’s memory that “about two weeks later, Ole Missie she get terrible sick. She just linger along for long time, but she never gets up no more. Weren’t long afore dey pus her away,

too, just like my mammy” communicates the observation of enslaved peoples that though powerful in life, enslavers would eventually meet the same end as the enslaved.

BEREAVEMENT: ‘MINISTERS MAKE NOVENA WITH THE / CHARRED BONES...’

Civil Rights activist Pulitzer Prize nominee Maya Angelou's description of hopeful mourning, or novena, in the following stanza suggests that tragedy can be reworked into a social and political resource by bereaved African Americans at the occasion of death and through the bereavement process. Angelou writes:

“Ministers make Novena with the
Charred bones of four
Very small
Very black
Very young children” (29).

Angelou’s characterization of African American bereavement in the face of racial violence against children foregrounds the political potential that grief holds; individual and collective mourning can act as a catalyst for mobilization and social justice activism. This chapter argues that bereavement in this tradition includes a continued attachment to the decedent, which complicates current understandings of Attachment Theory coming out of psychoanalysis and cognitive psychology. The protective features of continued posthumous connections between the living and the dead in 20th century creative writing and diasporic discourse practices suggest that current understandings of grief and bereavement processes that seek closure on posthumous relationships are inadequate for understanding styles of mourning arising out of the African America’s experience with morbidity.

Analysis of bereavement in *Eyes* and *Purple* illustrates that ‘complicated grief,’ that is delayed grief, absent or distorted grief and chronic grief are not the only responses to traumatic loss. Instead, the trope of bereavement and its consonant themes in intertexts such as Arna Bontemps’ *Black Thunder* (1936), Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Maud Martha* (1953) and Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale* (2005) demonstrate African American life conditions in post-Emancipation North America have rendered grief so normative that mourners have constructed adaptive and resilient strategies of bereavement, which defy categorization under dominant diagnostic criteria. When this conclusion is read back into the larger argument of the dissertation, it becomes clear that bereavement, the course and style of grief experienced by the individual and enacted in black public life in response to death, has been shaped by the events leading up to “the end of all past moments which is the present” (Olney, 149). We are left with the conclusion that these events: enslavement, survival, refugee crises, the labor camp system of the 19th century, and the confinement of Jim Crow law that flows into the formation of the prison industrial context, this confluence of historical events that funds the 20th century political economy of health, life and death have shaped African American bereavement styles over the course of the 20th century. As the rhetorical context of African American thanatology, and specifically the trope of burial and bereavement, is unpacked in future work, one can see that this ‘step’ in the ritual death continuum is never a discrete or finite moment, but rather appears as an ongoing ethical stance upheld by community norms of remembrance.

The trope of bereavement in is rich with descriptions of emotional efficacy, as well as prescriptions for grief ritual. Affective and psychological states of grief, indeed the entire bereavement process troped on in the corpus, to put it in Religious Studies

scholar Stephanie Mitchem's words, can be "understood relationally" (15). Human life and death are in African American tradition "part of the interconnected shared web of the universe; human life and death are contiguous realms connected by spirit" (15).

Bereavement in neoslave narrative is styled holistically, as for example when the protagonist of Charles Johnson's novel *Oxherding Tale* engages psychologically with the death of his predecessor in sexual enslavement to the master of the plantation. Andrew shares:

"I had the uncanny feeling that [he] had settled, even there, like an oil stain. He was, if you will, worked into the texture of the house he stained the things he'd touched like sweat, his fingertips, thoughts, and footprints clung to each object like an odor and left me with the feeling that, though dead, he had soaked, as I sat watching over Flo [mistress] as she slept, into everything" (54).

The characters in *The Color Purple* demonstrate a style of bereavement that can be described as hopeful mourning. For example, Sophia's family takes her mother's funeral as the occasion to renegotiate gendered power relations within the family. When the sisters insist that they act as the pallbearers, there is some dissention within her family as well as the community over the transgression of gender norms in the funeral ritual. Yet, when some of the brothers in the family stand with their sisters in their decision to act as pallbearers, it becomes possible for the entire family to reconcile with new gender dynamics and feminine identities. The mother's death, and her dead body serve as the vehicle for a transition in how black femininity is understood in *The Color Purple*. Likewise, when Celie and Shug visit the cemetery to try and find Celie's father's grave they encounter only the grotesque self-aggrandizement of her step-father's headstone.

Rather than mourn their inability to identify Celie's father's gravesite, which has been erased by a history of burying lynching victims in unmarked graves, Celie and Shug take the visit to the cemetery as the moment when they can commit themselves to one another as family. Throughout the centuries of diaspora in the North America, people of African descent have creatively adapted discourse practices that help to mitigate against the crushing force of loss and celebrate the possibilities for social justice that arise in the face of death.

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